



STAND UP TO HATE



LATINX EXPERIENCES OF HATE AND DISCRIMINATION

In 2019, A Milwaukee man named Mahud Villalaz was attacked outside of a restaurant. A white man said Mr. Villalaz was “illegal,” asked “Why did you invade my country?” and demanded that he “Go back, go back.” When Mr. Villalaz called him a racist, the man threw acid on his face. The man was charged and convicted of a hate crime and sentenced to ten years in prison.

Latinx Americans have lived and worked in Wisconsin for well over 100 years. From dairy farms to Door County cherries, Latinx people have long helped make Wisconsin special. Despite this, too many Latinx people are still treated as outsiders.

In the last 20 years, Wisconsin’s Latinx population doubled. In 2020, more than 7% of the state was Latinx.



Sadly, hate crimes against Latinx Wisconsinites have increased as well. Nearly 50 hate crimes against the community have been reported in the last ten years.

Small farming and factory towns, like Arcadia in Trempealeau County, have seen the largest growth in Latinx communities. In 2000, just 3% of Arcadia was Latinx. By 2020, Latinx people made up more than half of the city.

In 2006, city leaders in Arcadia responded with a series of proposals designed to “tackle the problem.” Among other changes, the new laws would make the city conduct all official business only in English. If adopted, many argued, these rules would put local Latinx people at risk.

“Agencies cannot afford the cost or time of translating our official notices in two or more languages.” The Mayor wrote. “Finally, the whole concept of a melting pot is to...MELT!”

More Latinx Wisconsin Stories

Door County, 1940s

Along with ill-equipped migrant camps, many migrant [cherry] pickers confronted racial prejudice in the communities surrounding the orchards in which they labored. Southern Black workers and Mexican American families recalled walking down Sturgeon Bay’s main streets and seeing signs in restaurant windows reading “For Whites Only – Negroes and Mexicans Not Admitted.” [...]

The presence of such a large nonwhite population during a prime vacation period also triggered resentment among many resort owners. [...] Some Door County resort owners expressed worries that the thousands of Mexican American, Black, and American Indian migrant workers in the area’s orchards would be an unsettling presence to the six thousand tourists and vacationers that patronized their businesses. They claimed, without proof, that migrants drove away their customers, even though few if any of the workers ventured to resort areas. One Sturgeon Bay proprietor advocated “sending all of these aliens back so we can save our resort industry.” District Attorney Edward G. Minor seemed to agree, offering that the best solution might be to set stricter restrictions on the movement of migrants in the area, constraining them to their work camps.

Excerpt from “The Cherryland Problem” by Sergio Gonzalez

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In the weeks that followed members of the local Latinx community spoke out against the new rules. More than thirty Latinx people came to a city council meeting to condemn the plan. They felt the city had turned on them and the laws unfairly targeted their community.

Complaints about people who speak another language are connected to hate crimes and violence. Every year we hear stories about people bullied and beaten up as their attacker demands they “speak English.” Beyond that, when a community cannot speak to police in their own language or they do not trust police, victims are less likely to turn to the police for help.

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Because of this discrimination, hate crimes against Latinx people are often not reported to police.

After weeks of anger, the mayor of Arcadia gave up on his idea. But laws designed to make English the only “official” language have not gone away. In 2007, Trempealeau County (home to Arcadia) passed its own official language rule. And in 2013 and 2020 the state looked at an official language policy.

Christine Neumann-Ortiz—a leader in the state’s Latinx community—called these policies “nasty and needless.” She warned that limits on speaking Spanish, and other languages, could increase violence. She continued, “It will serve to only fan the flames of bigotry that have already led to an increase in hate crimes in this country.”

More Latinx Stories in Wisconsin

Fond du Lac, 1949

During the summer of 1949, a Fond du Lac park custodian barred Tejano children and their families from swimming in the town pool because of their Mexican descent and their use of Spanish. When asked by the local press why he had restricted their entry, the custodian declared, “They say these people are American citizens. When you become an American citizen you should talk the language. Lots of these people don’t.” The park official further claimed that migrants might be carrying polio, and said that he would rather close the entire pool than let the Tejanos enter.

The Fond du Lac pool custodian’s actions prompted swift backlash from community organizations and town officials. The League of Women Voters of Waupun, which had been working with area churches to provide recreational activities for the Tejano families, appealed the park officer’s restriction of migrants to town officials. League representatives argued that the children were American citizens and were therefore entitled to the same privileges as other Wisconsinites. County officials worried about the negative messages the “racial difficulties” in their community might send to the migrants’ home communities in Texas, and how they might affect the future ability of local farmers to recruit Tejanos for work.

Excerpt from *Mexicans In Wisconsin* by Sergio Gonzalez