



Photo: *The Madison Times*

Can't Afford to Lose a Bad Job

Latino Workers in Dane County

Interfaith Coalition for
Worker Justice
Latino Workers Project

Executive Summary
prepared by the Center
on Wisconsin Strategy,
UW-Madison

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The Latino population is in the midst of dramatic growth in Dane County, more than doubling in size over the last 10 years. How are Latinos faring in the workplace and in the community? To fully answer this question, one needs to go beyond the available data and experience the real stories lived every day by Latino workers and their families. We've done just that with ***Can't Afford to Lose a Bad Job***, combining hard numbers with compelling individual narratives, found in complete detail in the full report.

This executive summary lists key findings regarding Latino workers in Dane County, and summarizes the most striking statistics and narratives assembled in compiling this report. It finishes by briefly describing recommendations for improving the lives of Latino families in Dane County.

Reading the report is critical to fully understanding the data and stories presented here. This report is available at www.workerjustice.org and www.cows.org or by calling 608.246.4355.

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Findings

- Latinos in Dane County often work in bad jobs characterized by poverty-level wages, rare and inconsistent overtime pay, erratic and inflexible schedules, few health benefits, and dangerous working conditions. But because of the very real threat of losing their jobs, many Latino workers are not able to challenge exploitative working conditions and are afraid to take time off, even in medical emergencies.
- Suspicion and discrimination affect every aspect of daily life for Latinos in Dane County. Whether it is the threat of being unjustly fired, being treated differently than co-workers, or being stopped by the police, discrimination takes its toll as jobs are lost, financial difficulties arise or are made worse, safety and health are compromised, and overall quality of life deteriorates.
- “Going without”—whether referring to adequate money, housing, childcare, government services, health care, or simply time to rest — is the unfortunate reality for many Latinos in Dane County.

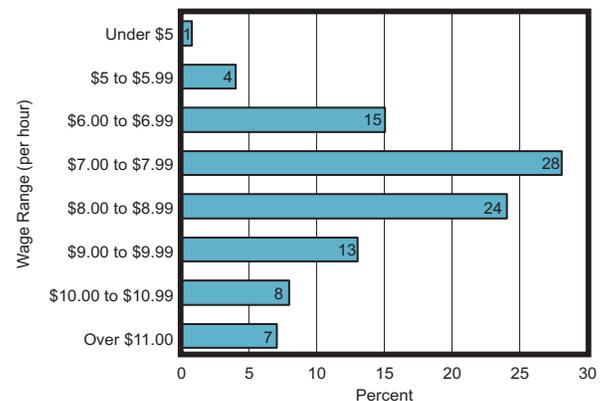
The Growth of the Latino Population in Dane County

The Latino population in Dane County has more than doubled over the last ten years. Although the 2000 Census counted 14,387 Latinos, the actual number could be significantly higher. Dane County is home to the third largest population of Latinos in the state, and while the percentage is still small (3.4 percent as of last year), it will very likely continue to grow in the future and play an increasingly important role in our community. This is evidenced in the high concentration (8 percent) of Latinos among children in Madison’s elementary schools. Of particular concern, however, is that Latino students accounted for a full 12 percent of low-income students in Madison schools during the 1999–2000 school year.

Exploitation, Low Wages, & Poor Working Conditions

Latinos in Dane County often work in bad jobs characterized by poverty-level wages, rare and inconsistent overtime pay, erratic and inflexible schedules, few health benefits, and dangerous working conditions. In our survey, 58 percent of the respondents’ jobs paid sub-poverty wages — less than \$8.12 an hour. Low wages force many Latinos to hold more than one job; one Latina

Wages for Surveyed Latino Workers in Dane County, 2001



Note: These numbers include all jobs held by respondents. Some respondents had more than one job.

Source: COWS’ analysis of 2001 Latino Workers Project survey.

housekeeper worked 20 hours a day between three jobs, sleeping only three hours a night. A union organizer described the work lives of many Latinos in Dane County as “a 1990s type of slavery.”

Almost one-third of those Latinos surveyed sustained an injury while on the job. Since the majority of Latino workers (60 percent) do not have health insurance, adequate medical treatment for injuries is simply out of reach. Furthermore, fear of reprisal forces many Latinos to choose between their much-needed jobs and their physical health. As a Latina restaurant worker said, “one complaint and we’d be fired.”

Discrimination & an Environment of Suspicion

Constant suspicion and discrimination affect every aspect of daily life for Latinos in Dane County. Whether it is the threat of being unjustly fired with no warning, being treated differently than co-workers, or being stopped by the police, discrimination takes its toll in lost jobs, mounting financial difficulties, compromised safety and health, and a deteriorating overall quality of life.

Many of the Latinos that we interviewed had lost multiple jobs because of Social Security “no-match” letters — notices from the Social Security Administration indicating a disparity between the Social Security number that an employee has given her employer and an actual number. Such errors are fairly common, and “no-match” letters are often sent in order to rectify the disparity. It is illegal for employers to fire employees because of “no match” letters, but Latino workers reported that it happens frequently. As one Latina housekeeper said, “They used my Social Security number as an excuse to get rid of me.” Although many Latino workers are discriminatorily assumed to be undocumented, in truth, many more Latinos are legal than illegal; yet they don’t have the information or resources to protect their rights.

A particularly egregious example of using mismatched Social Security numbers to discriminate against Latino workers occurred at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in Spring 2001. A university employee checked the validity of the Social Security numbers of only those custodians with Latino sounding names who worked for the Physical Plant. Those workers whose numbers did not match received a letter threatening to terminate their employment if they did not provide a valid Social Security number. In the end, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission determined the UW “discriminated against Hispanic employees as a class.” However, whether these workers will receive any compensation for this violation of their civil rights is yet to be determined.

Latinos told of constant harassment and discrimination in and outside the workplace. At a

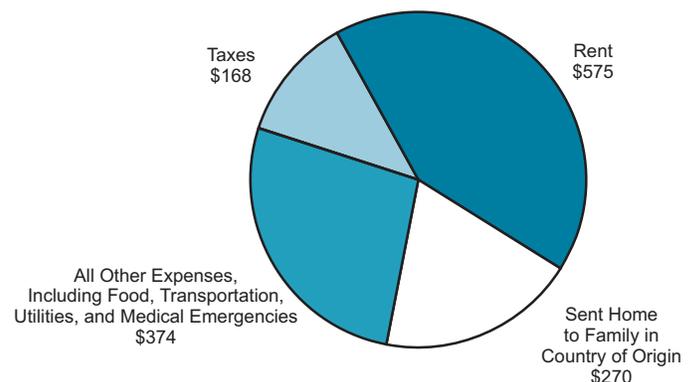
local hotel, for example, the Latino housekeepers were referred to as “burros.” And according to an employee at Contacto Latino, police in Dane County have historically stopped Latinos on their way to work and arrested them for no reason. This happened to one Latino worker, who reported being “treated like a criminal.”

Financial Strain, Limited Access to Services, & Declining Health

Bad jobs, exploitative working conditions, and discrimination have a wide array of negative effects on the everyday lives of Latinos in Dane County, including financial difficulties, lack of decent and affordable housing, lack of health insurance and adequate health care, and lack of access to services such as child care and federal public benefits. All of these factors cause considerable stress and can lead to declining physical and mental health. The upshot is a severely circumscribed quality of life for many Latinos in Dane County

The average Latino surveyed for this project is 26 years old, has been in Dane County for two years, and lives in an apartment with at least three other people. He earns \$8 an hour and works 40 hours a week, earning about \$1,387 a month, or \$16,640 annually; taxes deduct \$168 a month. With a monthly rent payment of \$575 and an additional \$270 sent to family members in their country of origin, only \$374 is left over at the end of each month for all other expenses,

Monthly Budget for Surveyed Latino Workers



Source: COWS' analysis of 2001 Latino Workers Project survey.

including food, utilities, medical emergencies, transportation, and anything else that might arise.

Housing is the biggest source of financial strain for many Latinos in Dane County. For the average Latino worker in our survey, a one-bedroom apartment at fair market prices accounts for over 40 percent of his monthly income. In fact, a resident of Dane County would have to earn \$22,360 a year, or \$10.75 an hour, in order to afford this apartment. The typical Latino worker in our survey (who earns \$8 an hour) would have to work 54 hours a week to pay for the same apartment. In order to afford high rents while working in low-wage jobs, many Latinos in Dane County share their apartments with other families and friends. A one-bedroom apartment might house four or more people. In our survey, 68 percent had at least four people living in their apartments.

Financial strain coupled with lack of knowledge about the availability of social services means that a number of private as well as public services are unavailable to many Latinos. For example, safe and affordable child care is out of reach for many Latinos, as it costs, on average, \$700 a month per child in Madison. Additionally, a variety of public services — such as Medicaid, Food

Stamps, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)— are unavailable to many Latinos because of documentation requirements and the lack of knowledge among many Latinos about their availability.

The ongoing stress of trying to make ends meet and managing hectic daily schedules, the lack of sleep due to working multiple jobs and taking care of families, the fundamental sense of insecurity because of on-going discrimination and the constant fear of deportation — these factors have a cumulative effect and have the potential to significantly decrease the quality of life for many Latinos in Dane County.

Methodology

Data for this report comes from four general sources: 1) a non-representative survey of 118 Latinos living in those neighborhoods with the highest concentration of Latinos in Dane County; 2) data from the 2000 Census, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Wisconsin State Department of Health and Family Services, and similar official data sources; 3) 20 in-depth, one-on-one interviews with Latino workers in Dane County; and 4) the testimony of workers and leaders from the religious, labor and Latino communities in Dane County.

Recommendations

1. The establishment of a Workers' Center for Latinos that would provide low-wage workers, as well as those without jobs, with education and training in employment discrimination, sexual harassment, wage and hour claims, workers' compensation, occupational safety and health, and unemployment compensation, as well as grassroots leadership and community organizing. The Workers' Center would also provide access to legal services, financial counseling, translation and other services not readily available to low-income workers.
2. Legislation that would allow undocumented immigrant workers residing in the U.S. to live and work here legally, without such status being tied to or dependent upon their employer or any particular job.

It may sound overly simplified to boil down the many and complex issues that Latino workers face into just two straightforward recommendations. Although the Latino Workers Project understands that neither the issues nor the solutions are simple or easily attained, we maintain that both a center dedicated to workplace issues and legislation to legalize undocumented immigrants are necessary and would significantly benefit many Latino workers in Dane County. We hope that **Can't Afford to Lose a Bad Job** will serve as the groundwork for further research — on low-wage as well as professional Latino workers — and as a call to action to improve the living and working conditions of Latinos in our community.