The Anxiety of a Strong Mexican-American Neighborhood

Since Trump’s victory, Chicago’s Little Village is grappling with a new reality: widespread fear.

PHILIP LANGDON | Dec 23, 2016 | 6 Comments

Mural of Our Lady of Guadalupe on the side of La Chiquita Supermercado in the Little Village section of Chicago. (© Philip Langdon)

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To grasp the pain caused by Donald Trump’s threat to deport large numbers of undocumented immigrants, there may be no better place to look than Little Village, a Mexican-American community on Chicago’s Southwest Side.

A long-established working-class neighborhood five miles out from the Loop, Little Village is home to more people of Mexican ancestry than any other community in the Midwest. Within its 4.4 square miles, bordering the Town of Cicero, live 79,000 people. More than 80 percent were born in Mexico or descended from Mexican immigrants.

In the weeks since Trump’s election, Little Village has experienced enormous trepidation. Twenty-five to 30 percent of Little Village residents are undocumented, according to Katya Nuques, executive director of Enlace Chicago, Little Village’s leading community organization. In the neighborhood’s five high schools this year, Nuques says, “about 25 percent of the graduating senior class were undocumented.” Half of Little Village’s families, she says, contain at least one person who has no legal right to remain in the U.S.

“The day after the election, the first thing my daughter did was start crying,” says Jaime di Paulo, executive director of the Little Village Chamber of Commerce. “She said, ‘My best friend is going to have to leave.’ My daughter
was born in the United States, but her friend wasn’t.” Nuques says there have been “a lot of instances of kids crying in the schools, and actual panic among adults.”

Massachusetts-born Andrea O’Malley Muñoz and her Mexican-born husband, Marcos Muñoz, settled in Little Village in the 1970s after working for Cesar Chavez on his nationwide efforts aimed at bettering the lives of farm laborers. Since the election, Muñoz says she’s heard neighbors talk about selling their furniture over the next few months in preparation for voluntarily leaving the U.S. at the end of the school year. They figure that disposing of their possessions in an orderly, gradual fashion will limit the financial losses from being uprooted.

“I heard about one guy, two days after the election, who was working at a Ford
plant in Chicago,” says Muñoz. “His wife was undocumented. She was in a state of panic, so he quit his job, and they drove to Mexico. I assume he was documented. Car makers don’t hire undocumented workers.”

With its 80 restaurants and dozens of shops selling bridal gowns and quinceañera dresses, Little Village’s West 26th Street commercial corridor is touted as the second-largest generator of sales taxes in all Chicago—second only to posh North Michigan Avenue. Since the election, however, store owners “are complaining that business is down 5 or 10 percent,” di Paulo says. “People are just not spending money. Maybe people are not in the mood to go shopping, or they’re buying fewer things.”

When candidate Trump pledged to deport millions of undocumented Mexicans, most native-born Americans probably didn’t stop to think what such an exodus might do to the neighborhoods that immigrants inhabit. This would be a good time to start thinking about it. In Chicago’s Little Village, the historian Frank S. Magallon said that Little Village—known until the mid-1960s as South Lawndale—owes a great deal to its success in accommodating an influx of people from Mexico.

First developed after the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, South Lawndale became a Czech enclave by the early 20th century and benefited from large industries with tens of thousands of jobs on the neighborhood’s periphery. Czech dominance began to weaken in the 1950s and 1960s, when many departed for suburbs such as Cicero and Berwyn. “Industry had been moving out slowly but surely after World War II,” says the Chicago historian Dominic Pacyga. An influx of African-American residents in neighboring North Lawndale also made some Czechs nervous about remaining. Storefronts began to go vacant.

Czech-American businesspeople, led by the local real estate salesman Richard Dolejs, set out in 1964 to rechristen South Lawndale “Little Village” and to welcome Mexicans, who were starting to move in from Pilsen, a more crowded neighborhood immediately to the east, and from Mexico itself. Some of the Mexican newcomers acquired small corner stores from the Czechs and kept them operating. Others opened restaurants and dress shops, eventually appealing to customers from throughout metro Chicago—a region that as of 2011 counted 2 million Hispanics among its 9.2 million inhabitants.
Mexicans and their children filled the decades-old worker cottages, bungalows, two- and three-flat buildings, and corner apartment buildings with more people than ever before. Density shot up—it is now about 18,000 residents per square mile, enough to support a wide array of commerce, from stores, insurance agencies, and check-cashing offices to peddlers who sell tamales, paletas, and beverages on the streets and outside schools.

When I studied Little Village for a forthcoming book on walkable American communities, I was struck by how tidy and organized the community is. Though most residents are of modest means—Census figures put the median household income at about $34,000 a year—people care for their properties. Black faux wrought iron fences separate the city sidewalks from the houses’ small front yards. Some residents hang plastic shopping bags, the kind dispensed by supermarkets, on their fences so passersby will have places to
dispose of litter. The effect may not be elegant, but it shows how much the inhabitants value a clean, orderly environment.

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In his book Heat Wave, the sociologist Eric Klinenberg pointed out that during a horrific 1995 heat wave that killed hundreds of elderly Chicagoans, the death rate in Little Village stayed extremely low. He attributed this partly to the community’s comparatively low crime rate and its busy commercial areas, which brought people out and gave them social contacts, helping them know where to turn in an emergency.

Little Village does see its share of shootings—targeted attacks of one gang against another. Yet while homicides on the South and West Sides of Chicago have skyrocketed in the past two years, Nuques says Little Village has seen homicides fall 40 to 50 percent since 2008. Church and civic groups work diligently at giving young males alternatives to gang life.

The big question now is how Little Village and other immigrant neighborhoods would fare if the large-scale deportations that Trump talked about were to materialize. “The uncertainty is creating anxiety,” says Raul Raymundo, chief executive of The Resurrection Project, a community development corporation that focuses on substantially Latino neighborhoods such as Little Village, Pilsen, and Back of the Yards.

Unease has been sown by Trump’s pledge, during the campaign, to deport undocumented “criminals” and end President Obama’s Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which offers some legal protection to hundreds of thousands of people who were brought to the U.S. as children and stayed here illegally.
“My niece arrived at age three. She speaks only English and is about to graduate from high school with a 3.9 grade-point average,” says Michael Rodriguez, Democratic committeeman of the 22nd Ward in Little Village. “She would qualify for DACA, allowing her to work and go to school legally in the U.S. Trump said he would take that away on his first day in office.”

“I know a young man, 28, a business owner, who is thinking of moving to Windsor, Canada,” Rodriguez adds. “He is undocumented. He was in the DACA program. He was thinking about going to a university in Iowa for an MBA. That’s all gone.”

Di Paulo at the Chamber of Commerce worries that people may be deported for crimes that are minor or for which they have already been adequately punished. “Driving while intoxicated is a criminal offense according to ICE [the federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency],” he says. “We need to figure out what ‘criminal’ is. We argue that if you paid your debt to society, a crime should not be grounds for deportation.”
Mayor Rahm Emanuel has promised that as part of being a “sanctuary city,” Chicago municipal agencies, including the police, will not collaborate with ICE agents on deportations. On December 14, the City Council approved a budget for Chicago’s Legal Defense Fund, which will enable The Resurrection Project and Heartland Alliance’s National Immigrant Justice Center to increase the number of lawyers available to represent immigrants in legal proceedings.

Another element of the program entails training 200 volunteers to help immigrants learn their rights and fight deportation. Because many undocumented immigrants are unfamiliar with their rights, Enlace Chicago helped organize a coalition of nonprofit groups in Little Village. Di Paulo says the coalition is doing things such as developing an information packet and training the staff of retail businesses to give flyers to customers, explaining their options. “We’ve got to prepare for the worst and hope for the best,” he says.

It would be a shame if the Trump administration were to destabilize hard-working immigrant neighborhoods like Little Village, where the vast majority, documented or not, are trying to build productive lives and decent communities. Perhaps the longstanding civic activism of Little Village and other communities across the nation will help prevent that from happening. “We are a highly organized neighborhood,” Nuques says. “That is a great advantage.”

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About the Author

Philip Langdon is the author of *Within Walking Distance: Creating Livable Communities for All*, which explores six walkable communities across the U.S., including Chicago’s Little Village. The book will be published by Island Press in April 2017.