

## City planning must factor in immigrant and other low-wage workers

[Alvaro Huerta](#), Ph.D. candidate in Dept. of City & Regional Planning | 3/15/11 | [3 comments](#) | [Leave a comment](#)



As city and regional planners, we plan and build livable communities and regions for the public. But these plans often exclude the low-wage workers who carry out the domestic household services in mostly middle-class and affluent communities. This work force includes those who clean our homes, take care of our children, and maintain our yards. These workers — many of them recent immigrants and racial minorities — are not well represented in the planning process.

The bureaucratic planning process, for example, commonly fails to provide adequate public transportation for nannies and housecleaners, who toil inside suburban homes and gated communities. In addition, planners typically don't solicit feedback or input from paid Latino gardeners when designing and creating suburban front yards — an American obsession. Meanwhile, many immigrant workers lack the time, language skills, and educational background to have a voice in the formal planning process.

### Who Are They?

The immigrant domestic household economy encompasses housecleaners, paid gardeners and, very often, day laborers. This informal work force — mostly Latino immigrants in California and beyond — has taken over the traditional household duties and responsibilities that many Americans assumed before World War II, when women regularly stayed home to care for their children and clean the house while men worked outdoors to “master” the front lawn of the archetypal suburban home.

Due to their limited English skills, educational background, and financial capital, most recent immigrants seek low-wage jobs, which Americans have come to reject due to their low social status, dismal pay, and bleak opportunities. Most of these so-called immigrant jobs require intense manual labor and pose workplace dangers. While Latina immigrants primarily work as nannies and housecleaners in this informal sector, Mexican male immigrants dominate the paid gardening niche and day labor work force, especially in the Southwestern states.

### Poor Treatment

According to conservative voices, recent immigrants from Mexico and elsewhere are dangerous, unproductive individuals who represent a social burden to this country. Immigrant workers, they argue, come to the United States to seek government assistance, commit crimes, take away jobs from native workers, and depreciate wages.

These claims can be easily refuted. Recent immigrants, for instance, have been barred from receiving governmental assistance under former President Bill Clinton's 1996 Welfare Reform Act. Thus, how can immigrants represent a drain when they don't qualify for most government-sponsored programs and services in the area of public assistance? Moreover, while conservatives argue that immigrants commit more crimes than U.S. citizens, they rarely provide any hard data to substantiate their claims.

On the contrary, recent research shows that undocumented immigrants on average commit less crime than American citizens, especially once we take into account age, gender, and other factors to make valid comparisons. We need to compare apples to apples and oranges to oranges. For example, if we know that recent immigrants are younger (and most likely male) compared to

citizens, then we can't compare these two groups equitably when it comes to crime, especially because we know that young individuals are more likely to commit a crime than older individuals. In an essay recently published in *The American Conservative* magazine, Ron Unz does an excellent job of examining the complex nature of immigration vis-à-vis crime rates. He analyzes existing data to debunk myths perpetuated by conservatives and others about the so-called Latino immigrant menace. Despite being a leading force against bilingual education in California in the 1990s, Unz puts his Harvard and Stanford educational background to some good use by closely examining the nuances of crime rates in the United States.

In addition to anti-immigrant public debates, some local public policy directly targets the immigrant work force. We can clearly see an example of anti-immigrant legislation in the City of Los Angeles leaf blower ban of the mid-1990s. On December 3, 1996, the city council voted 9 to 3 to ban leaf blowers in residential areas. The draconian penalties for using this work device, operated mainly by Latino paid gardeners, included a misdemeanor charge, \$1,000 fine, and up to six months in jail. In response, Latino gardeners founded the Association of Latin American Gardeners of Los Angeles (ALAGLA) and initiated one of the most dynamic social justice movements since the "Justice for Janitors" campaign of the early 1990s and the United Farm Workers cause of the 1960s.

Following countless protests, marches, press conferences, candlelight vigils, and a week-long hunger strike, the Latino gardeners eventually prevailed, forcing the city council to dramatically amend this law. While the affluent Westside residents who favored the ban focused on "public nuisance" aspects such as noise and air pollution, the Latino gardeners successfully re-framed the issue as the "haves against the have-nots." At the end of the day, the Latino gardeners prevailed in the court of public opinion.

Other examples of anti-immigrant legislation include Arizona's SB 1070, requiring enforcement authorities to question anyone they "suspect" of lacking legal status in the United States. In addition, some municipalities are passing laws that allow building owners to seek proof of citizenship for renters. Given that immigration enforcement pertains to the jurisdiction of the federal government, these laws have been challenged in the courts. Nevertheless, the anti-immigrant hysteria in the current economic recession has generated an atmosphere of fear and harassment for the more than 11 million undocumented immigrants in this country.

### Deserving of Respect

Despite lacking higher education, special training, and financial capital, many immigrant workers are sophisticated individuals who own and operate their own small businesses. Paid Latino gardeners, for example, regularly engage in complex entrepreneurial transactions such as expanding business operations, developing client routes, billing and receiving, and trading and selling goods and services with other small businesses.

Apart from their business savvy and experience, paid Latino gardeners make our communities greener, cleaner, safer, and more beautiful. While not recognized for it, they also increase property values. They also relieve middle-class and affluent individuals from performing time-and labor-intensive yard work.

### What's the Role of the Planner?

To meet the needs of the indispensable immigrant work force, planners should accommodate domestic household service workers when designing, creating, and redeveloping neighborhoods and communities. For example, do wealthy communities have access to public transportation for nannies and housecleaners? Do planners and policy makers pressure and provide incentives for manufacturers of leaf blowers and other gardening work devices to produce quiet, environmentally friendly equipment?

In the spirit of the late planning theorist and leader Paul Davidoff, planners should resurrect the advocacy planning model and directly meet the needs of recent immigrants and racial minorities who lack the political clout and financial capital to defend themselves against unjust laws and policies. In the advocacy planning model, for instance, planners take on the role of a lawyer by working closely with immigrant and marginalized communities to meet their specific needs in city hall and beyond. To date, the planning profession has generally remained silent in challenging claims that recent immigrants are to blame for high crime rates, depleted social services, and increased poverty.

Moreover, when creating and advocating for greener communities, such as building more parks and planting more trees in urban areas, planners should promote the role of immigrant workers as part of this mission. Instead of attempting to criminalize Latino paid gardeners, as in the case of the Los Angeles leaf blower ban, planners should work closely with policy makers and concerned community members to create alternative solutions for all parties, including the immigrant work force that takes on the most difficult and least respected jobs in America's cities, suburbs, and rural areas. Planners, whose primary role is to serve the public interest, are the ideal people to speak on behalf of *los de abajo* (those on the bottom).

Cross-posted from the [American Planning Association](#)



#### Comments to "City planning must factor in immigrant and other low-wage workers":

chair education committee  
[March 18, 2011, 8:24 am · Reply](#)

At the same L.A. City Council meeting in which the City Attorney's Office first proposed harsh consequences for violating the L.A. leaf blower ban, all involved objected immediately. That included City council members, ban proponents and ban opponents. The change was not in response to the drastic acts of ALAGLA, nor in response to their claims of "racism", which were not made by gardeners from any other ethnic group.

[\[Report abuse\]](#)

Chair Education Committee  
[March 17, 2011, 4:45 pm · Reply](#)

A PH.D. candidate is allowed an opinion, even if it is flawed. However, facts should be accurate. The L.A. ban on gas blowers within 500 feet of a residence states: "Violation of the provisions of this subsection shall be punishable as an infraction in an amount not to exceed One Hundred Dollars (\$100.00)" — not "a misdemeanor charge, \$1,000 fine, and up to six months in jail" as stated.

What happened to the ALAGLA once the law was passed? It seems to have folded. What social justice policies did they advocate, besides fighting a proposed law that would protect them, first, from the documented pollution resulting from leaf blower use? We were hoping ALAGLA would remain to help gardeners get group health insurance and teach business & negotiation skills such as asking for, at least, yearly cost of living raises without fear of losing your job. Though not published, results of our random public opinion Survey99 showed most employers would agree to raises if asked, even though they might not think to just give them.

See <http://www.zapla.org> for the history of this ban, and our responses to erroneous claims.

[\[Report abuse\]](#)

James R

March 16, 2011, 10:01 am · Reply

“The American Conservative magazine, Ron Unz does an excellent job of examining the complex nature of immigration vis-à-vis crime rates. He analyzes existing data to debunk myths perpetuated by conservatives and others about the so-called Latino immigrant menace. Despite being a leading force against bilingual education in California in the 1990s, Unz puts his Harvard and Stanford educational background to some good use by closely examining the nuances of crime rates in the United States.”

How ironic that next month Jorge Comacho, an immigrant Hispanic gangmember, goes on trial for killing Lisa Thayer, a Harvard classmate of Ron Unz.

[\[Report abuse\]](#)