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ABSTRACT

There is no doubt that Latin Americans have *arrived* as a cultural presence in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Despite their presence dating back to the 1970s post-coup era and before, since about the mid-1990s, Latin Americans have become increasingly visible in the GTA. The contemporary vibrancy of Latin American cultural, artistic, business, and professional activities and institutions represents both continuity and change in the history of institutional community development among Latin Americans. This chapter provides a very brief and general overview of this experience through a description of the main pan-ethnic Latin American community organizations. We suggest that Latin Americans have a history of being extremely active and building a wide range of organizations.¹ With time, Latin Americans have expanded beyond the early first-generation dominated agenda to one that is relevant to both first and subsequent generations. The former focused on immediate settlement issues including employment, social services, education, and women—issues that remain relevant because of the ongoing arrival of new immigrants from the region. At the same time, the latter address an expanding set of issues and interest groups, including political representation, anti-racism, youth, professionals, and the arts. These changes can be understood as part of the ongoing process of settlement and incorporation, but also as an outgrowth of accumulated capacity building and institutional learning.

Latin American immigrant organizations in the Greater Toronto area have faced the external challenges faced by other immigrant and ethno-racial organizations, namely, competition and limited funding. But they have done so in the context of a growing “population” that is in fact quite heterogeneous in terms of class background, education, national origin, and immigration entrance status (Factor Hispano 2006). Despite this diversity of backgrounds, there is growing evidence of shared social exclusion in Canada. When grouped together, which is often done with government and other survey data, Latin Americans exhibit relatively low levels of income (Ornstein 2000) in spite of their diverse backgrounds. This means that Latin American organizations face the challenge of responding to extremely diverse and perhaps increasingly polarized needs in a context where government institutions and funding bodies generally prefer to support “one of each” per group. The assumption of homogeneity, or the ignoring of internal diversity, in turn poses challenges for pan-ethnic organizations, which must re-invent themselves and present different faces to various funding sources and constituencies to remain viable.

This chapter is based on information collected for the *civil society* component of a broader research project on *Social Cohesion and International Migration in a Globalizing Era: Transnational Solidarities and Newcomer’s Incorporation in Canada*.

Under that project, the first three authors of this chapter developed the Latin American Research Group (LARG), with a four country (Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala and Colombia) and four part research agenda that included the civil society component, designed to analyze the institutional/organizational history of Latin American immigrants in Toronto, and the relationship between incorporation in Canada and transnational engagements. The civil society component of the project addressed basic questions about the range and history of civic organizations formed by the selected Latin American groups, and analytical concerns including questions about the factors that shape the organizational culture of these Latin American immigrants; how organizational mandates develop and evolve over time; and how Latin American organizations have interacted with Canadian civil society.

We conducted 18 group interviews with just over one hundred Latin American and Canadian participants, between October 2004 and June 2005. The information gathered through these interviews is documented in a series of summary reports for each thematic group in the study. These reports are organized by the composition of the group interviews, and include: 1) Salvadorans, 2) Guatemalans; 3) Colombians; 4) Chileans; 5) women; 6) indigenous rights organizations; 7) umbrella organizations; 8) Canadian solidarity groups (including unions, churches, academia, etc.); 9) refugee rights and advocacy organizations; 10) church groups; 11) priests; 12) educational groups; 13) art and performance groups; and 14) experts in the area of mental health and immigration in Latin America. For this chapter we draw primarily on information gathered in the “umbrella organizations” group interview.
