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**Chicago's
Latino Homeless:**

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At Right: Three members of the Ruiz* family sit on the porch of the home they may soon lose. It will be the third loss this year. Their father, Juan, is currently detained in Arizona. The eldest son, also Juan, 17, was killed in a drive-by shooting on July 25.

StreetWise Feature

Providing their own Sanctuary

Latino homeless remain unseen to those outside the community

Story and photos by Brenna Daldorph
StreetWise Contributor

Adriana Villanueva*’s three children scamper down the bustling sidewalks of 26th Street, where *elote* men sell plastic cups of melon, cucumber, and pineapple, colorful beach balls, and off-brand purses. The children want everything, drawn in by the magic of Chicago’s Mexican commercial district.

Yet this busy scene has hidden woes. Many of the peddlers used to have jobs. Their colorful booths and the empty storefronts behind them show the recession’s toll on Chicago’s Latinos. So do Adriana’s tired eyes and the children’s neediness. A few months ago they lived in a spacious apartment; now their living space has been reduced to one tiny room as Adriana fights a daily battle against homelessness.

At night, when she and the children are curled up in the bed they share, the buzz of 26th Street disappears into darkness. This, too, is evidence of new woes. A few years ago nightlife here was vibrant. Then Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials started camping out, ready to pounce on late-night revelers. On other occasions helicopters buzzed overhead, officials raided homes, and shoppers at a local mall were arrested. According to the Latino Union, in an average week, more than 300 Chicago residents are deported. One of those may soon be

Adriana’s husband, Vicente*, who is awaiting deportation in Cook County Jail.

Immigrant Latinos, already living “in the shadows” of society, are some of the first to fall through the cracks. High job losses, immigration raids, and steep housing prices all contribute to increased homelessness, yet the most recent Chicago Coalition for the Homeless survey stated that only 6 percent of the city’s homeless are Latino. Official statistics might tell one story, but any religious leader or community member of Pilsen or Little Village will testify that Chicago’s Latinos are definitely in trouble.

“It’s very, very bad,” says Father Charles Dahm of Saint Pius Church, 1919 S. Ashland Ave, one of Pilsen’s largest congregations.

Contrary to the stereotype that immigrants drain public resources, Latino immigrants are turning to their own family members, churches, and community for support and thus escaping official counts based on shelter enrollment and use of public resources. Various factors prevent this tightly knit but suffering community from seeking and accessing public aid.

Families

On a warm July afternoon, Efenia Ruiz* sits with two of her children on the stoop of her small brick house in Back of the Yards. Efenia is fighting losing battles. One is to keep Isaiah*, 8, who has Down syndrome, from eating dirt. Another is to secure the release of her husband, an undocumented immigrant now imprisoned for illegally crossing the border. She is also losing the fight to keep her home of three years. With her husband’s presence reduced to his sketched

cartoons and photos of him in orange prison garb on the mantel, Efenia feels as if the house is the only stability left for her children.

“I always dreamed of having a house for my kids,” she said. “Before, I was moving from place to place. At least with a house I feel more secure.”

Without her husband’s income, Efenia makes about \$800 a month—not nearly enough to make mortgage payments. She sells soap and Mary Kay products in the neighborhood but spends most of her time caring for Isaiah, who’s too difficult to leave with a friend or neighbor. Her American-born children receive some benefits—especially Isaiah and Ofelia*, 11, who’s also disabled. But because she’s undocumented, Efenia doesn’t qualify for much more assistance.

Her story is common in Little Village, which Padre José Landaverde of the Latino Union estimates is 90 percent Latino and 80 percent undocumented. Mexican immigrant households have been experiencing serious declines in income since 2000, and their poverty rate is rising faster than any other population, according to a report issued by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. Job losses and spousal deportations have left many families without a steady income; moreover, rent prices are rising in gentrifying communities like Pilsen. During the housing boom, undocumented residents could get high-interest loans. Now, even President Obama’s loan modification program doesn’t alleviate steep mortgage payments. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, more minorities are suffering foreclosures than whites.

These families gather in the back room of Our Lady of Guadalupe Anglican Catholic Mission, which occupies a storefront on 26th Street. With the door thrown open to let in the breeze and the smell of chicken cooking, Marilu Vargas sits among stacks of corn tortillas and fresh tomatoes, providing food for the clients for whom she and Padre Landaverde help to obtain loans.

When he established the mission in 2007, Landaverde, a refugee from El Salvador and a community activist who founded the Latino Union in 2000, sent busloads of his parishioners to help the needy in Mexico and New Orleans. These days, most of his work is community based.

Luis and Dulcidia Blanco, permanent residents, joined the mission because they loved the emphasis on helping others. Now they’re turning to the mission for help themselves. Their four children have grown up in the house on Cicero that they’ve owned for the past 15 years. However, with Luis, a truck driver, unable to find work, they’re now facing foreclosure.

“Mom gets really depressed,” said their daughter Joceline, 14. “She cries a lot. Sometimes I come into the room and she is just staring at the wall.” Dulcidia shakes her head.

“Sometimes I just want to escape, to leave it all behind,” she says.

Though the family received a loan modification grant, it only knocks about \$800 off of a \$3,000 mortgage. Some weeks Luis makes less than \$100.

“If they take the house away,” said Dulcidia, “what are we going to do?”



Doubling Up

Local churches offering aid can do little besides referring a homeless family to a shelter or housing them for a few nights in the church itself. Even though Saint Pius does have subsidized housing, most of it is still too expensive for the parishioners. The answer?

“Homelessness is different here than in other communities,” says Landaverde. “You end up with two or three families living together.”

Welcoming people into the home is a common practice in Latino immigrant culture, and “doubling up” was a major issue discussed at the *Todos Contamos* forum on Latino homelessness. Lorena Duran, a career counselor at San Jose Obrero Mission, 1856 S. Loomis St., in Pilsen, emigrated from Mexico as an undocumented child.

“At the symposium it came to me that there was a time when my own family was homeless,” she said. “When we arrived, we moved in with family. I had a roof over my head and I wasn’t out on the street, so I never considered it. Here, in Pilsen, from my experience, family relies on family, or even close friends.”

Jorge Mújica, policy director of Our Lady of Guadalupe Anglican Catholic Mission, 3442 W. 26th St., agrees.

“That’s how the community is,” he said. “We open up our homes. The other day my wife and I were counting how many people we had had to stay—it’s been 34 in the past few years. That’s just how we are. You know, if a young, undocumented man comes here they afford the rent by living maybe 12, 14 to a house.”

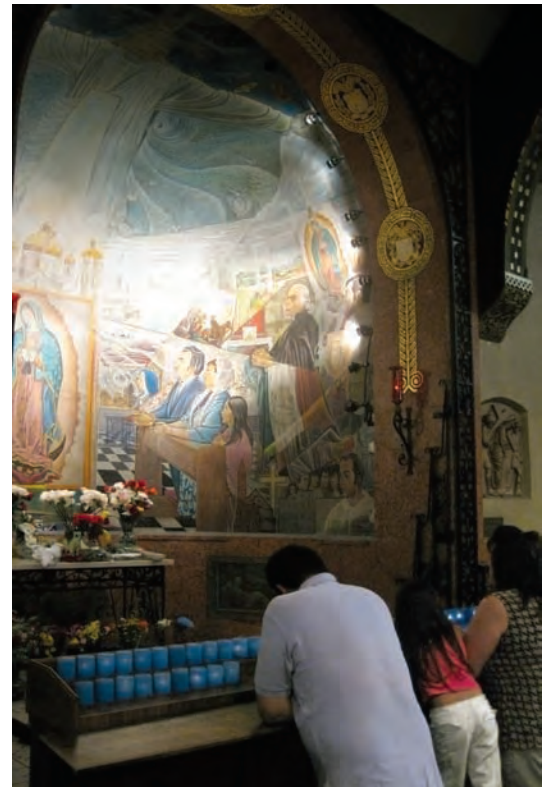
People doubling up often don’t consider themselves homeless. The city doesn’t, either, meaning government money for specialized services never reaches the community. Thus, a major goal of *Todos Contamos* was to change the definition of homeless to include those doubled up.

Above: Anaclaudia Villanueva*’s sunny smile brightens the family’s basement apartment.

Top Right: A family worships at St. Pius Catholic Church in Pilsen. The predominantly Latino congregants at Pilsen’s largest church are facing job loss and immigration raids.

At Right: Deported in February, Juan Ruiz* tried to re-enter the U.S. in April after learning of the hospitalization of his wife, Efenia*. She lights a candle to St. Jude—the saint of impossible causes—to get him out of prison.

Bottom Right: Adriana Villanueva* and her three children, Pablo, 3, Anaclaudia, 6, and Dahlia, 8, share this basement room with the daughter of another family.



Beyond cultural practices, there are other reasons an immigrant family wouldn’t access government services: They may not realize they qualify, or they may be fearful of providers who don’t offer translators or culturally sensitive help. And many are terrified of being turned in.

“Why should they trust the system?” said Israel Vargas, director of San Jose Obrero Mission. “The system has never worked for them.”

Finally, years of corruption in Mexico and Central American countries have led to a cultural distrust of government.

“In Mexico, if you need help, you go first to a priest or a schoolteacher,” Mújica said. “The priest can maybe give you beans, and the teacher can give you advice. If they don’t help, you go to a doctor. Only fourth might you go to the government.”

While seemingly generous, overcrowding is often a safety hazard and causes emotional strain. This is true for the Villanueva family.

A dresser, two beds, a TV, clothes, and toys for Dahlia*, 8, Anaclaudia*, 6, and Pablo*, 3, lobby for



Top Left Detail: A makeshift living room provides a touch of home for homeless day-laborers staying in an abandoned factory.

Left: Day-laborers sleep in an abandoned building in Little Village.

Above Detail: The men who sleep in this room of the abandoned factory use blankets and plastics to keep warm during winter months.

Above: Twenty-sixth Street, known as Chicago's Mexican Shopping district, buzzes with street vendors. Despite the festive air, most peddlers can find no other work and many shops are closed.

Lower Left: Padre José Landaverde, a community organizer and immigrant rights activist, welcomes local families into Our Lady of Guadalupe Anglican Catholic Mission.

Bottom Left: Staff at Our Lady of Guadalupe Anglican Catholic Mission have assisted Dulcidia and Joceline Blanco, 14, in getting a loan modification. They may still lose their home.



space between the narrow walls of the tiny basement bedroom.

The family, who owns the house, formerly lived in the spacious upstairs apartment and rented the basement to tenants. Vicente worked two jobs, earning \$700 a week. After his arrest, Adriana found jobs scarce and often requiring documentation. Finally she found housecleaning work and now earns about \$100 a week. In a desperate attempt to keep the home, she and the children moved in with their downstairs tenants, freeing the upstairs for new renters. Even now, the kids sometimes forget they no longer have free reign of their home—none of their things can go out of the tiny bedroom.

“The hardest thing is the kids,” Adriana said. “Things upset them, they get more rebellious. The husband of the family we share an apartment with gets upset and tells them off. We try not to be there.”

Adriana avoids going home.

“Sometimes I will be leaving work and I want to get out of the car and walk and walk and walk and never come back,” she said. “But I have to be a strong woman. What do I gain by giving up? I lose everything. If I look around, a lot of people are willing to help me.”

The stress of overcrowding, fear, and unemployment have caused terrible community issues. Domestic violence has steadily increased, according to local priests.

“Domestic violence has its roots in poverty,” said Landaverde.

Sol Flores, director of La Casa Norte, 3533 W North Ave., a service for homeless or at-risk youth and families in Humboldt Park, reported that staff at the Department of Child Services told her there were increased cases of Latino child abuse.

That’s not all.

“Drug and alcohol use have increased,” Landaverde said. “We see a lot of violence—the domestic violence is high, and there have also been shootings.”



On the Streets

“There are different types of homelessness,” Landaverde said. “These days there is only a small percentage on the streets because of mental illness; most are because of the economy.”

Ten economic refugees camp out in an abandoned factory in Little Village. Trash, glass, and stagnant puddles litter the wide floor. But there are also signs of humanity: magazine pictures taped to the walls, parked bicycles, and old mattresses stacked with blankets and clothes. A few chairs and overturned crates form a makeshift living room for the residents.

“This is like a family house,” said Ramon Flores*, one resident. “The people who can work buy food. We look out for each other.”

Ramon, a day laborer, usually finds work only one or two days a week, even if he waits for hours at Home Depot for jobs. Contrary to the stereotype, most men on the streets of Pilsen and Little Village work, often as day laborers. But even during good times, a day laborer with steady work makes only about \$10,000 a year, according to a 2000 survey conducted by Landaverde. Now it’s even worse for the undocumented—temporary day labor agencies ask for documentation, and bosses bully those without papers. On July 23 ICE officials scanned the Home Depot lot.

Still, the underground economy flourishes.

Waiting for work in the oppressive sun is Marcos Gonzalez*, 26. It’s already four o’clock and he’s still without work, an earlier venture gone awry when the employer tried to pay him substandard wages.

This shy man with a round, friendly face tells his story in a quiet voice. Born in Belize to parents fleeing the civil war in El Salvador, he grew up in Texas. Two years ago, on New Year’s Eve, he was stopped at the Mexican border, after partying there with friends. Though he had a green card pending, he was detained for seven months and then deported to Belize, a place he hardly knew. After encountering terrible working conditions, he knew he had to make it back to the U.S.

“Yes, I understand there are some illegal methods of entry,” Vargas said. “The fact of the matter is, they are here. As brethren it is our job to make sure they aren’t on the street starving, we need to pick them up and help them the best we can.”

He’s been here since February looking for work.

“America is great,” he said. “I’m so lucky to be here, so lucky. All of that—it’s like a bad dream, seems so long ago. After seeing what it was like over there, I’m just happy to be here.”

Marcos stays at Pacific Garden Mission, 1458 S Canal St., a shelter just south of downtown. Only a few shelters serve the Pilsen and Little Village communities; the emergency men’s shelter run by Centro Familia, 2622 W. Cermak, sleeps 130 but often turns away 10 to 20 per night.

While the nationwide unemployment rate reached 9.4 percent by May, the Latino unemployment rate was 11.4 percent. Thirty-one percent of Mexican immigrants work in manufacturing: in May alone, manufacturing lost 156,000 jobs, more than in any other sector.

“Those who are immigrants or are undocumented are the first to be let go and the last to be hired,” Flores said.

The Community Responds

Community members try to ease the suffering. Churches are at the forefront of this struggle, said Father Jim Collins of St. Procopius, 1641 S.Allport St.

“I am proud to be Catholic in a parish like this,” Collins said. “We may bicker among our bishops in the church, but we have a vibrant clothing closet, soup kitchen, food pantry.”

Most programs for the poor at St. Procopius Church are run by an army of dedicated, older Latinas raised in a tradition of religion and charity. Robertina, 57, a round woman with clean, quick hands and frizzy salt-and-pepper hair, comes to Mass daily and volunteers despite her own hard times. Her two sons lost their jobs and the family is now living together in a crowded home.

“Serving people who don’t have is serving God,” she said. “When I was young, we were often hungry in Mexico. Still, when people came by hungry, we’d give them food to eat.”

In the 22 years he’s been at Saint Pius, Padre Carlos Dahm, or “Father Chuck,” has sculpted the church to fit the needs of his parishioners, 90 percent of whom, he estimated, are immigrant Latinos. He’s blended religion with social services and politics, establishing a soup kitchen and secondhand store and filling the newsletter with stories of immigrants’ struggles.

But the increasing need strains churches. Dahm looks haggard, evidence of stress and of recent health problems. In Little Village, Landaverde sometimes works himself to exhaustion while laboring to help everyone who turns to him for assistance.

A Fresh Start

At the San Jose Obrero Mission, a cramped corner building in Pilsen, impossible odds are overcome. According to its director, Israel Vargas, the mission is the only shelter in the Midwest catering specifically to Latino males. A dynamic Puerto Rican immigrant with closely cropped hair and a pressed suit,

Vargas spouts ideas and energy.

“In my perfect world, there’d be fast music and everyone would be moving and all my men would be in suits, ready to go,” he said.

At the mission, 32 residents are given roughly four months to get back on their feet. Case managers connect the men to services offering ESL classes, computer skills, and career and resumé training, and further help them to develop goals. The men get haircuts, three hot meals a day, and use of an on-site computer lab. In return, Vargas expects sobriety, curfew adherence, and hard work. He understands what the men need to get back on their feet—he himself was once in jail, homeless, and on drugs.

“Here, we aren’t playing games—I know the games,” he said.

However, it sometimes feels like residents fight impossible odds. The program’s goal is to get the men into their own homes and to hold steady jobs. But for the undocumented, stability is almost unachievable.

“You see the immigrants coming back,” Vargas said. Still, Duran, the San Jose Obrero career counselor, offers undocumented immigrants the same opportunities as other residents—including the chance to have a mock interview with Vargas.

“Yes, I understand there are some illegal methods of entry,” Vargas said. “The fact of the matter is, they are here. As brethren it is our job to make sure they aren’t on the street starving. We need to pick them up and help them the best we can.”

For one resident, José Lopez*, coming to the U.S. has been a mixed bag.

“The market is hard to break into and the bad part is the unemployment,” he said. “The good part is this place.”

In Little Village, Centro Familia provides similar services for homeless families. However, even if a family does leave the shelter, they often enter substandard living situations. Recently, three families moved out—and into a shared apartment.

“Sometimes you got to do what you got to do to survive,” said Julio Gonzalez, program manager for the men’s shelter.

Final Notes

The Latino community of Chicago is faced with increased job loss, homelessness, and raids. While these struggles go unnoticed in the wider community,

Pilsen and Little Village residents band together. Even in hard times, laughter and love exist, whether shared over tortillas in an abandoned factory or over *huevos rancheros* in the back room of Our Lady of Guadalupe Mission. Efenia laughs when Isaiah strips off his clothes and charges down the hall of the house they may lose. Adriana offers a tired smile when her little Pablo dances in his car seat as they drive endlessly, avoiding returning to their tiny one-room home.

These scattered moments don’t alleviate worry for the future. Funding cuts mean less money, of course, even if officials do take notice of the community. But though Congress is debating immigration reform, which may include amnesty for permanent residents, poor, documented immigrants face many of the same challenges as poor, undocumented immigrants.

“I’d love to be out of work,” says Deacon Jose Herrera of Our Lady of Guadalupe Mission. “But that’s not going to happen.”

Epilogue:

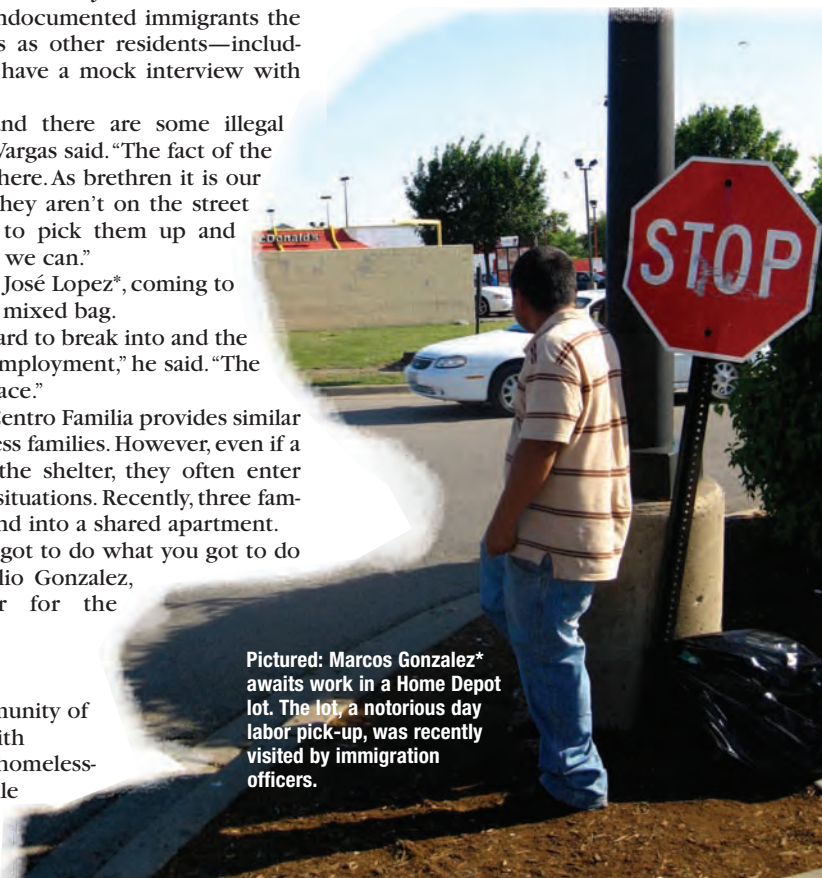
Fatal gunshots on July 25 added more loss to the lives of the Ruiz family. They are already facing the impending foreclosure of their home and a husband and father who could spend up to ten years in prison for attempted re-entry of the U.S.

The family’s oldest son, Juan, 17, was shot in the head while sitting outside a friend’s house just a few blocks from the Ruiz residence. He died the next morning in a nearby hospital.

“He had just been accepted at a school, had just gotten a job,” said Deacon José Herrera of Our Lady of Guadalupe Mission in Little Village. “He was hope for the family.”

So little hope already and it is suddenly extinguished.

**For the safety of those interviewed, StreetWise has changed the names of any undocumented person and any child. Translations were provided by José Landeverde, José Herrera, Lorena Duran, Joceline Blanco and Jim Collins.*



Pictured: Marcos Gonzalez* awaits work in a Home Depot lot. The lot, a notorious day labor pick-up, was recently visited by immigration officers.