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The Impact that the Expansion of Warehousing has on Latinx Youth in the Inland Empire: The School to Warehouse Pipeline

A Policy Brief by Karla Vicencio-Ramirez



(Photograph. High School students walking on campus, with a warehouse pictured next door to the highschool. <https://www.pressenterprise.com/2024/05/08/how-many-inland-empire-schools-are-next-to-warehouses/>).

Background

The Inland Empire region of Southern California is home to a predominantly immigrant, Black and Latinx population. The Latinx population in the Inland Empire (I.E.) has long struggled with impoverishment, unemployment, and with an attainment of higher education.¹ The I.E. also coincidentally is highly recognized for its leading number of warehouse facilities and logistic sites in the country.

¹ Joy, Darrin. "A Key Southern California Region Faces Transformation, Challenges." News and Events, 6 Oct. 2023, dornsife.usc.edu/news/stories/southern-california-inland-empire-latino-population-growth/. Accessed 15 Apr 2024.

More than an Economic Boom?

Described by its own regional newspaper as “warehouse central”², the Covid-19 pandemic is believed to be a reason for the creation of such an overwhelming surge of warehouse facilities. As online shopping and the need for fast speed delivery peaked during the pandemic and has only increased since then, warehouses and workers were needed to get packages delivered. What can be regarded as a good plan that caused an economic boom in the region, creating more job opportunities for Latinx individuals³, can be argued by other parties that this surge of facilities has caused more harm than good. Although the I.E.’s warehousing and logistics sites are still relatively new and out on a continuing rolling basis of manufacturing⁴, the sites have already been directly linked to greater problems that can more negatively affect the Latinx population. A great amount of studies and writings have been dedicated to discuss the environmental effects of the infrastructure and transportation of moving goods⁵, but what has yet been explored in depth is a possible relationship or effect the sites have on Latinx youth and their educational attainment specifically.

The Education Gap

In the Inland Empire, the Latinx population is at an estimated 2.3 million people, and of this population, only 11% obtain a bachelor's degree or higher.⁶ The Inland Empire is one of few regions in California that greatly lags behind the rest of the state in the attainment of higher education, but the question is why?⁷ What to some, can easily be answered as economic problems, I believe that it is more than that. This is because in the Inland Empire, a study conducted by the University of California, Riverside found “just 1 in 10 Latinos has a bachelor's degree or higher”.⁸ While it is included that many people just simply believe that they cannot afford to attend college, eight out of 10 students in the district can qualify to have almost all of their expenses and fees paid for, if only opportunities and resources were just more circulated in these communities. Lack of money cannot just be chalked up to be the answer, but also not having the proper guidance, being first generation and being a migrant can interfere with

² Horseman, Jeff. “Inland Empire Is Warehouse Central, but How Did It Happen?” *San Bernardino Sun*, 20 Oct. 2021.

³ Newton, Jim. “Pushback to Inland Empire Warehouse Boom Spans California’s Economic, Racial Divides.” *CalMatters*, 23 Feb. 2023.

⁴ Torres, I., and Klooster, D. 2021. “WAREHOUSES, POLLUTION, AND SOCIAL DISPARITIES.” Redlands, CA: The University of Redlands.

⁵ Newton, Jim.

⁶ “¡Aquí Estamos! A Data Profile of Latinos in the Inland Empire.” *Center for Social Innovation*, 21 Sept. 2022, socialinnovation.ucr.edu/aqui-estamos.

⁷ *5-Year Report*, inlandempiregia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/GIA_5YearReport_Official_HQ.pdf. Accessed 15 Apr. 2024.

⁸ Horseman, Jeff.

attainment of educational goals.⁹ It also does not help that employment in the region does not really include high skilled jobs for young adults to look up to or hold the idea to attain.¹⁰ As the region is only abundantly recruiting and inviting industries that require basic to no education.¹¹ These characteristics all build up to act as obstacles that the Latinx population has to deal with in the Inland Empire, and the overwhelming inclusion of warehousing sites can more readily cause unintended harm towards the fulfillment, thriving and educational attainment of the Latinx population in the region.



(Photograph. <https://www.sbsun.com/2021/09/29/inland-empire-is-warehouse-central-but-how-did-it-happen/>).

The Experiences of Recent High-School Graduates in the Warehouse Industry

I interviewed with current & past employed warehouse workers from the Inland Empire, recent high-school graduates from the years of 2019-2023, to gather a sense of understanding of their journey from high school to their warehousing job and how it is going for them, to conclude whether a positive, negative or neutral impact is being made on Latinx youth.

I first began asking workers about their educational experiences. Many workers expressed that during high school, they treated school with little importance, as an afterthought, seeking to just complete the bare minimum so that they could graduate.

⁹ Falcon, Lauren. “Breaking down Barriers: First-Generation College Students and College Success: The League for Innovation in the Community College.” *Breaking Down Barriers: First-Generation College Students and College Success | The League for Innovation in the Community College*.

¹⁰ Joy, Darrin.

¹¹ Johnson, Hans P., Deborah Reed, and Joseph Michael Hayes. *The inland empire in 2015*. Public Policy Instit. of CA, 2008.

Workers opened up about their relationship with schooling, stating that their negative feelings and carelessness about school really started to come up as a result of the impact they felt that the COVID-19 pandemic had on them. The pandemic changed everything, in-person teaching was moved to online learning, and most workers recounted their struggle to stay motivated and disciplined with their work.

When asked about college and their opinion about attending it, a great deal of workers communicated that while the idea of college was nice and that they would have liked to attend it right out of graduating high-school, many ultimately decided against it because they held a greater interest and desire to begin making money right out of high school. Many of the workers expressed similar sentiments that college would have taken up time that they could have been using to work, so while they were interested in college, they decided to postpone going and dive into the workforce.

“When I was in high school, I did want to go to college. I really liked school, but a reason why I didn't go through with my plan to go into college is because I don't want to blame Covid-19, but I feel like Covid-19 did play a part in making my decision as to why I didn't want to go to college anymore. When classes got moved to online, I really thought everything was gonna stay online for a very long time and I really didn't like online classes. I learned best physically in the classroom. Another reason would be that I was working a lot during that Covid-19 era. I was working a lot. I was working almost every day of the week, and seeing the amount of money I can make by working, I thought to myself, why go to college?”

- Fontana City Warehouse Worker

Most of the workers also shared that they identified with being first-generation, as their parents immigrated to the U.S. from Latin countries such as Mexico, Guatemala and El Salvador. As a result of being first-generation, the workers revealed that in high-school, they felt an overwhelming amount of confusion and intimidation about the college application process. These sentiments were connected to the worry of going and wasting time and money by not being sure of what they wanted to study. Pressure to not waste time and expenses was an added stressor for workers as they also expressed feeling a certain amount of responsibility to help their family pay for bills.

When asked about how they were introduced to warehousing or made aware about job openings, many workers stated that they were introduced to the industry because they had relatives or friends already working in warehousing, and so it was easy for them to get the job as the application and hiring process was easy.

Most workers described their work environment and relationship with co-workers and their bosses in a mostly positive way but only some complained of feelings of negativity in the

workplace. Many stated that while their bosses were supportive, the workers knew not to step out of line because they were reminded that they were replaceable.

“The [Managers] are really hard on you. Everything has to be done so quickly, because, if not then your numbers go down. Like, the warehouse company numbers go down. So, you know, they're relying on you to get the warehouse going. They always tell us, ‘you guys need to be quicker on it.’ If the rate goes down, you are given TLT, it's like, time off task.”

- Fontana City Warehouse Worker

“Honestly, it's not worth it, but they're the only ones that hire. You know that they are always hiring and are willing to take people in, but it's just, it's really depressing working in the warehouse.”

- Riverside City Warehouse Worker

While most of the workers described their job being enough to support themselves and pay their own bills, they expressed concern with the job being enough when they have their own home or support a family. For context, most participants stated that they lived under their parents' households, and some that live separately, described having to balance two jobs or working paycheck to paycheck to make ends meet.

The Hope & Aspirations of Latinx Youth

Most of the workers I interviewed stated that they have been working in warehousing for 1- 3 years, with most of them acquiring their warehouse job as soon as they turned 18 years old and have been working in the industry since. Additionally, many expressed that while their warehousing job is comfortable, they do not want to continue pursuing a professional career in warehousing and hope to be working elsewhere in the future. Some workers even expressed the sentiment of wanting to go back to college so that they could receive a degree or certification of some kind so that they may be on a pathway more aligned with their career, the field of work they are interested in and future personal goals. Though a worry that came up for workers was not being able to successfully balance work and school, as some work overnight 12 hour shifts 3-4 times a week, or even more depending on if they are offered overtime work. Workers expressed that after a day of work, they are so exhausted from standing on their feet all day and performing labor work that they usually have no spare energy left after work but to do their necessary chores and sleep.

“I'm tired. Honestly, like, I don't really have the energy to do much else...when I get home, I'm very tired. For the most part I just eat and go to sleep, and then just wake up the next day and do the same thing. I do not have the time or want to go out and do anything else.”

- San Bernardino City Warehouse Worker

Workers mentioned the warehouse offering programs that would pay for workers' college courses but some participants expressed that they did not take advantage of the resource because the classes that the warehouse would only cover are business and management related courses. These courses did not pique the interest of some workers, because they felt it would only tie them deeper into warehousing, as it would push them to management roles, and it would not allow them to leave the industry and explore other options.

Policy Recommendations: Investing in and Implementing College and Career Readiness Programs & Divesting from and Limiting the Construction of Warehouse Facilities

While warehouse jobs are getting the workers by, they will not be able to successfully sustain themselves in the long run and continue working under such labor intensive conditions. The Latinx youth community in the Inland Empire are surviving, not living or thriving.

With the investing and implementation of college and career readiness programs in high-schools, Latinx youth will be able to learn more about the college process and how to succeed in institutions of higher education. A majority of Latinx youth in the I.E. identify as first-generation, and do not obtain the social capital or knowledge about higher education, and these special programs will help Latinx students tackle the anxieties and confusion and guide them through the education system. Additionally, these special programs will expose Latinx students to different careers and industries that are outside of the warehousing and labor industries.

The impact that warehousing has had on the I.E. region has not been entirely negative, but it benefits the I.E. and its Latinx community very little. Although these warehouses offer community members jobs, these jobs are not sustainable for the youth to build their life on, as many would have to balance another job to make ends meet or leave the I.E. region if they want to find work in other industries such as tech.

It is with this information in mind that I recommend the counties of San Bernardino and Riverside limit the development and rolling out of warehouse facilities. These counties should limit any further investment in the warehousing industry and instead look to invite different job industries that would bring different work, knowledge and opportunities so that Latinx youth are not only surrounded and exposed to the work of warehousing, but instead inspired to pursue other careers that would allow them to step into professional field.