



## Law Center Study Cites Mistreatment of Latinos in South

by : Al Dozier

No cross burnings. No lynchings.

But a pattern of abuse reminiscent of the old South is documented in a [new report](#) from the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Ala.

The victims this time are not African-Americans, but Latino immigrants.

Mary Bauer, author of the report and director of the Law Center's Immigrant Justice Project, doesn't mince words. "This report documents the human toll of failed policies that relegate millions of people to an underground economy, where they are beyond the protection of the law," Bauer says.

Immigrants in the South are routinely targets of wage theft, racial profiling and other abuses driven by an anti-immigrant climate, according to the report.

It's no surprise to Emily Stanek, program coordinator of the Coalition for New South Carolinians. "We get calls all the time from people who are exposed to racial profiling," Stanek says.

Findings similar to those in the report are cited by Elaine Lacy of USC-Aiken, a history professor who has done extensive research on immigration issues.

"Today many Southerners regard Latino immigrants as criminals who burden the local economy and take jobs from native-born residents, increase crime rates, refuse to adapt to U.S. culture, carry diseases and pose a threat to Southern culture and values," Lacy writes in a 2008 publication.

All Southern states have passed legislation aimed at limiting unauthorized immigrants' access to jobs, housing, health care, transportation and public benefits, according to Lacy. Some of the legislation, such as "English only" laws, affects all of those whose English skills are limited.

Tammy Besherse, an attorney and advocate for the poor at the South Carolina Appleseed Legal Justice Center, says an "English only" law has little effect because federal protections supersede it. "It's more of a way of saying, 'We don't want you here,'" Besherse says.

She sees similarities in such laws to legal barriers once faced by blacks. "They don't call them Jim Crowe laws. They call them Juan Crowe laws."

Besherse says the biggest social issue facing Hispanic immigrants is a misplaced assumption that any Latino seen on the street is here illegally.

The Law Center report, "Under Siege: Life for Low-Income Latinos in the South," documents the experiences of Latino immigrants who face increasing hostility as they fill low-wage jobs in Southern states that had few Hispanic residents until recent years.

In South Carolina, the Hispanic and Latino population increased by 8.37 percent in 2007 to nearly 169,000, about 4 percent of the total state population. It was the largest population increase as a percentage in the United States.

The report is based on a survey of 500 low-income Latinos — including legal residents, undocumented immigrants and U.S. citizens — in Nashville, Charlotte, New Orleans, rural southern Georgia and several towns in Alabama.

It says reform legislation must be coupled with strong enforcement of labor and civil rights protections.

"We're talking about a matter of basic human rights here," Law Center president Richard Cohen said of the report. "By allowing this cycle of abuse and discrimination to continue, we're creating an underclass of people who are invisible to justice ... ."