



# **From Homeland to Home: The Complexities of Identity and Belonging among Chicago's Latinx Diaspora**

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**Abstract:**

This research investigates the experiences of Latinx immigrants in the City of Chicago as a driving force for identity formation and a sense of belonging. How do immigrant experiences of Latinx communities shape their identity formation and facilitate their integration into the host society? And how are they different between waves of migration? To answer these questions, I conducted nine months of ethnographic research, utilizing participant observation and conducting 32 in-depth interviews with Latinx immigrants from two distinct waves, early 2000s and post-2021. Using these data, I identify four stages of migration: pre-immigration, arrival, settlement, and long-term residence. Within these stages, four main factors contribute to the formation of identity and a sense of belonging of Latinx immigrants in the US: interactions with the established local community, proficiency in the host country's language, connections, and social networks within the Latino community in the city, and individuals' ties with their home country. The research findings demonstrate that these experiences significantly shape the integration of Latinx migrants into the host community. These findings can inform the development of inclusive and supportive policies and programs aimed at facilitating the successful integration of immigrants into American society.

Key words: Latinx immigrants, identity formation, sense of belonging, integration, stages of immigration process.

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## **I- Introduction**

The experiences of Latinx immigrants in Chicago are dynamic and ever-changing, influencing how they perceive themselves in relation to others and shaping their sense of place. Additionally, these experiences play a pivotal role in either fostering or impeding their integration into the host community. While extant research has extensively explored the reasons behind people choosing to migrate to other countries (Francesco 2018), there is relatively less research on how their experiences in these countries shape their perceived identities and contribute to their integration into their host community. For Latinx migrants in the United States, various aspects are explored such as economic and political changes, discrimination, social exclusion, and violence (Valentine and Sporton, 2009; Hack-Polay et al. 2021; Pugh JD 2018; Fearon 1992, Hogg and Abrams 1988). Integration, in its essence, entails a process of mutual adaptation, and exchange of values, norms, and behaviors between immigrants and the local community (Klarenbeek 2021; Zhang et al. 2023). This research seeks to answer the following questions: How do immigrant experiences of Latinx communities shape their identity formation and facilitate their integration into the host society? And how are they different between different groups of migration?

I aim to address this gap in the literature by examining how lived experiences of Latinx immigrants influence the formation of their identity and sense of belonging within two distinct groups in Chicago: those who arrived in the early 2000s and those who have arrived more recently and have been living in the city since 2021.

Drawing on participant observation and in depth-interviews, I look at the relationship between immigrant experiences, identity formation and perceived levels of integration and sense of belonging across these two groups. I argue that these experiences happen in four distinct stages:

pre-immigration, arrival, settlement, and long-term residence. Within each stage, four specific influential factors are present. Firstly, the interactions of Latinx migrants with the established local community. This includes examining the extent to which Latinx migrants have opportunities for social interactions, connections, and relationships with individuals from the host community. Secondly, the level of proficiency in the language spoken by the host community. Language proficiency, which I refer to the use of everyday English to communicate, plays a crucial role in facilitating communication, understanding cultural nuances, and forming connections with members of the host community. The third factor at play is the connections established within the Latino community in the city. This includes examining the presence of support networks, community organizations, and cultural events that contribute to a sense of belonging and provide avenues for social integration. The last important factor is the connection that individuals maintain with their home country. These ties influence the degree to which migrants identify with their home country's culture and maintain connections with their homeland communities.

This research offers a new perspective on the complex dynamics of immigrant identity negotiation and challenges the notion that a sense of belonging is a fixed state. I use the concept of *Identity* in this research to refer to the way individuals understand themselves, including their beliefs, values, experiences, roles, and affiliation. It is the sense of self that individuals develop and maintain, shaped by various factors, such as personal experiences, and social interactions. I argue here that identity plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' self-perception, relationships with others, and their place and belonging within various social groups and communities.

Identities are not fixed or uniform (Lange 2020), but rather continuous and dynamic, shaped through lived experiences. Their sense of belonging<sup>1</sup> is closely tied to positive or negative interactions with the host community. A strong sense of belonging can be fostered through meaningful relationships, shared experiences, common goals, and a sense of shared identity or purpose.

This argument highlights that the process of cultivating a sense of belonging is fluid and evolves over time. By exploring the experiences of immigrants in their journey towards integration, this research sheds light on the broader processes of identity formation, sense of belonging, and social integration within immigrant communities. By recognizing the fluidity of belonging, society can move away from rigid notions of assimilation and instead focus on creating spaces where individuals can maintain their unique cultural identities while simultaneously engaging with the broader community. This reframing encourages a more holistic approach to integration that values and celebrates the contributions and experiences of migrants.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I introduce the case of two waves of migrants in Chicago, to contextualize the issue. I then conceptualize *integration* as understood within extant literature. I follow this by examining current debates on identity formation, and sense of belonging, showing how the literature focuses largely on economic, political, and social dimensions, but it has neglected immigrant experiences as key influencer of immigrant integration. They, however, do provide insightful information in a broader sense of the immigrant's journey, so their validity should not be undermined. I then focused my attention on the interviews I conducted, discussing the four phases of immigration: pre-immigration, arrival,

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term "sense of belonging" to refer to the subjective experience of feeling connected, accepted, and valued within a particular social group, community, or environment. A strong sense of belonging will include feelings of acceptance, inclusion, being understood by others. It also involves feeling of being welcomed, supported, and valued for who you are.

settlement, and long-term residence. I identify four factors that allows immigrants to negotiate their identity and sense of belonging within these phases. Lastly, I dive into discussing my findings and how they complement other scholarly works, and end with my limitations, and a conclusion that brings it all back to my main argument.

### **a- The case of two waves of Latinx migrants in Chicago**

The influx of Latinx migrants in Chicago in recent years presented significant challenges and opportunities for both the migrants and the city. The number of arrivals surged, with over 38,000 migrants arriving since August 2022, according to Chicago's Office of Emergency Management and Communications. In its early stages, up to 25 full buses, approximately 1,250 migrants per day, were arriving from Texas (NBC Chicago 2023). As Chicago adopted sanctuary city<sup>2</sup> policies, to protect undocumented immigrants, the need for temporary spaces such as police stations, churches, tents, and shelters have been critical to accommodate the big influx arriving at different points of the city every day.

This new wave of migration presents certain differences from the Latinx migration observed in the early 2000s. In the early 2000s, Latinx migrants arrived gradually over the years from various geographic regions, including Mexico, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic (Paral, et al 2004). In contrast, the recent group post 2021 exhibits a larger scale and volume, with a substantial number of migrants arriving within a relatively short period, coming from over 100 different countries (Associated Press 2024). The changes and shifts in migration routes and paths are also a distinct feature of the newly arrived Latinx migrants, many of whom have been traveling through six or seven different countries for months at a time, covering thousands of miles from their home countries.

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<sup>2</sup> A sanctuary city is a community with a policy, written or unwritten, that discourages local law enforcement from reporting the immigration status of individuals unless it involves investigation of a serious crime. These communities typically do not honor requests by ICE to detain undocumented immigrants (Global Refuge 2021)



The policy environment surrounding immigration and the treatment of migrants evolved since the early 2000s, with Chicago adopting sanctuary city policies. I would argue that this designation reflects a commitment to providing support and temporary spaces for migrants, acknowledging the importance of ensuring their safety and well-being during their transition.

However, sanctuary cities are not exempt from integration pushbacks by the host community. Structural discrimination and challenges related to integration persist for many immigrants. For instance, during my interview one of the immigrants from Latin America shared her experiences of encountering hesitancy from people in the community to approach or engage with her due to language barriers. As she did not speak the local language fluently, she often faced difficulties in communicating and forming meaningful connections. This hesitancy from others, while not necessarily explicit discrimination, can contribute to feelings of exclusion and hinder social integration.

The decision to migrate is influenced by various socioeconomic factors, which also has undergone changes over time. Economic conditions, political situations, and social factors in both the migrants' home countries and the United States all contribute to their decision to seek a new life elsewhere (Francesco 2018). However, it is essential to recognize that these are not easy decisions, as they often involve immense sacrifices and risks.

Many immigrants begin their journey to the United States several months before reaching their destination. They face numerous challenges and dangers, traversing multiple countries, including jungles, dry terrains, and areas where organized crime groups operate. The migrants endure these treacherous conditions while ensuring their children do not go hungry or fall ill. Their hope is to reach a haven where they can provide their families with the necessary means to start afresh.

Resilience and determination are common attitudes of these migrants in the face of such adversity. Their decision to leave their home countries and undertake such perilous journeys underscores the urgency and importance they place on seeking better opportunities and improved living conditions for themselves and their loved ones.

## **b- Defining Integration**

There are several definitions and interpretations of “integration” as a concept. These are some ways in which integration has been defined in the literature: (1) “integration is conceptualized as a lengthy process whereby immigrants are accepted as contributing members of a society” (Alakoc et al. 2023; Pennix 2003). (2) “integration is an overarching term describing the process and outcomes of migrants adjusting into a receiving society. It implies a two-way process in the change of values, norms, and behaviors for both migrants and locals” (Klarenbeek 2021; Zhang et al. 2023). For this paper, I define *integration* as a dynamic process that involves mutual acceptance and adjustment of immigrants and the receiving society, it involves the active engagement and participation of both immigrants and locals, as they undergo changes in their values, norms, and social structures.

A complete integration happens when migrants are actively involved in the key institutions of a society and are acknowledged as “valid and accepted part of the country’s community.” (Alakoc et al. 2023; Alba and Foner 2016). This means that migrants have equal opportunities to participate and contribute to various aspects of society, such as politics, economy, and culture, and they feel a sense of belonging and acceptance within the community. It also involves the establishment of meaningful connections, interactions, and relationships with individuals and institutions in the receiving society. Integration goes beyond mere assimilation or adaptation; it involves mutual adaptation and reciprocal process of cultural exchange.

Some scholars have focused on the legal integration of refugees and immigrants and its broader implications (Lomba 2010; Campbell 2006; Kervin 2012), others on socio-economic and labor market integration (Koyakova and Brenzel 2020; Simsek 2020), others studied the political integration, and citizenship policies (Fleishmann and Dronkers 2010; Koopmans 2010; Hainmueller, Hangartner and Pietrantuono 2017), or the psychological integration of refugees (Echterhoff et al. 2020; Schick 2016; Phillimore 2011).

In one of these early studies, Ager and Strang (2008) proposed a conceptual framework based on four themes representing ten key domains of integration. The first theme relates to markers or means of successful integration, which include the domains of employment, housing, health, and education. The second theme has to do with social connection, which is comprised of the domains of *social bonds*, or one's proximity with one's family or ethnic/religious/national community, *social bridges*, which foster a sense of acceptance between communities, and *social links*, which connect refugees to the state structures such as government services. The third theme focuses on facilitators of integration, which requires the state to remove barriers (i.e. the language or knowledge barrier) that stall or delay successful integration at the local level. Facilitators consist of two domains: a) language competence and cultural knowledge attainment, and b) safety and stability. The final theme in Ager and Strang's framework is the necessary foundation for successful integration, namely the domain of rights and citizenship.

More recently, Harder et al. (2018) proposed the Immigration Policy Lab Integration Index, which is a survey-based scale identifying six dimensions of immigrant integration. "Immigrant" is a broad category in this case that includes different groups such as new citizens, refugees, and other migrants. The authors' six dimensions are psychological, economic, political, social, linguistic, and navigational (Harder et al. 2018). In developing their measure, Harder et al.

defined *integration* “as the degree to which immigrants have the knowledge and capacity to build a successful, fulfilling life in the host society” (Harder et al. 2018; also see Kymlicka 1995).

The concept of integration is multi-dimensional and subject to various interpretations. Scholars present different perspectives and definitions of integration, highlighting its dynamic nature and the mutual acceptance and adjustment required from both immigrants and the receiving society. Furthermore, integration involves not only assimilation or adaptation but also a reciprocal process of cultural exchange. It encompasses multiple dimensions, including legal, socio-economic, political, and psychological aspects, reflecting the complex factors that contribute to immigrants' successful integration. In this research, I incorporate the frameworks proposed by Ager and Strang to draw possible parallels into markers, facilitators, and dimensions of integration. Ultimately, a comprehensive conceptualization of integration is essential for promoting social cohesion, fostering mutual understanding, and building inclusive societies that benefit both immigrants and the receiving communities.

## **II - Literature Review**

James Fearon (1992) argues that a modern concept of “identity” within the field of International Relations is rather complex, and underdeveloped. However, he proposes that identity is commonly used in two interconnected ways, which he refers to as “social” and “personal” identities. In the social sense, “identity” represents a social category, a group of individuals identified by a label and defined by specific rules regarding membership and perceived characteristic traits. On the other hand, personal identity refers to distinctive characteristics that an individual takes pride in or considers socially significant, usually seen as relatively unalterable (Fearon 1999, 2). Hogg and Abrams define identity as “people’s concepts of who they are, what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others” (Hogg and Abrams

1988, 2). Fearon's conception of personal identity is anything but unalterable. Latinx immigrants in Chicago navigate their identity by displaying considerable flexibility in how they express themselves in their daily lives. They transition between their ethnic background and a dual "bicultural" identity, adapting to the host community they reside in. In some cases, they may even develop an entirely new identity that is not tied to their ethnic heritage or local context, depending on their personal journey of immigration.

Building upon Fearon's exploration of the complexities of identity, Salomon Kebede further emphasizes the significance of identity formation and sense of belonging in the context of immigration. Kebede argues that establishing a sense of belonging in a new socio-cultural environment involves the continual process of forming and reforming identities. Forced migrants, in particular, undergo a transformative journey that necessitates the negotiation of identities and relationships with different communities (Kebede 2010). For Latinx migrants in Chicago, this process of identity negotiation is influenced not only by personal factors but also by contextual elements such as the socio-cultural environment, language proficiency, social network and support system, immigration policies, and others.

Identity Process Theory (IPT) deepens this study's understanding of the dynamic nature of identity formation. According to IPT, one's identity is not fixed but rather a dynamic product of our interactions with the world around us (Timotijevic 2000; Breakwell, 1986, 1993, 2000). This theory emphasizes that identity is shaped through the interplay between our personal characteristics, such as how we perceive things, and the social structures and influences we encounter. In essence, identity is expressed through our thoughts, actions, and emotions.

IPT argues that people are aware of their identity and actively monitor and adjust it as needed. They constantly revise and reconstruct elements of their identity based on their

experiences and the demands of their social context (Timotijevic and Breakwell 2000). In this sense the IPT model of identity is similar to that of Giddens' (1991) notion of self-identity: "identity is no longer a given, everything is open to question, and we are forced to look at ourselves and continuously ask the question 'who am I?' and reflect on its result" (Giddens 2023). The self must be actively constructed and sustained to cope with uncertainties in modern societies (Giddens 2023).

This process of self-awareness for the migrants happens in a transnational space. Individuals navigate between multiple cultural influences and make decisions about the way they choose to manifest their self in relation to other individuals. Transnationalism, according to Schiller et al. (1992) is defined as 'the process by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement' (Tedeschi et al. 2020; Schiller et al. 1992). Transmigrants develop and maintain multiple relations, familial, economic, social, organizational, and political, that span borders. These individuals are considered by scholars to develop identities within social networks that connect them to two or more societies simultaneously (Schiller et al. 1992). The process of building meaningful relationships is not fixed or stagnant; instead, it is constantly changing and developing, playing a significant role in the formation of individuals' dual or multiple identities and their sense of belonging (Tedeschi et al. 2020, 605).

Transnationalism considers the way that "people increasingly interact across borders and in a network of transnational relationships. While interactions may be border-crossing, the actors' body remains situated and limited in time and space" (Niekrenz, Witte, Albrecht 2016). Transnational belonging describes how migrants come to be attached to two or more countries simultaneously. Belonging can take place within the country of settlement but can also be

oriented towards the country of origin, i.e. a transnational belonging. However, how older generations of migrants give meaning to a sense of belonging in an increasingly transnational world is still largely unexplored (Klok et al. 2017; Torres 2013)

Simultaneously, Social Identity Theory (SIT) explores how individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups, influencing their behavior and sense of self (Stets & Burke 2000). Through this lens, Latinx immigrants often grapple with multiple identities, combining aspects of their ethnic and national affiliations. These intersections shape their sense of self and influence how they perceive themselves, and how they are perceived by others (Deaux 2020). SIT proposes that dual identities can exist, and coexist, conflict, or complement each other. Over time, immigrants make choices about how to express their identities. These choices are influenced by various factors, including cultural adaptation, social context, and personal preferences. Some immigrants actively maintain their original identity, while others adapt to fit their new environment.

Drawing on this interdisciplinary research, I seek to further explore and deepen current understanding of identity formation and belongingness among Latinx immigrants in the context of Chicago. By adopting a comprehensive conceptual framework that considers the significance of different stages within the immigrant experience. This study aims to shed light on the specific challenges faced by these individuals at each stage and the corresponding changes in their identities and sense of belonging. Additionally, this way of framing immigrant experiences allows for empirical validation of existing theoretical models. By comparing immigrants' subjective experiences with established theoretical models, my research provides empirical evidence that supports and/or challenges existing theories.

### **III- Theoretical Framework**

Scholars have different perspectives on the factors influencing identity formation and sense of belonging among immigrants. Valentine and Sporton (2019) argue that global economic forces are central to this process, Skrentny (2013), on the other hand, highlights the negative impact of discrimination and social exclusion. John W. Berry (2007) emphasizes the role of acculturation and adaptation in shaping immigrants' identity and sense of place. However, existing measures of Latinx migrant identity lack clarity regarding the operationalization of factor and the extent to which they contribute to identity formation and a sense of belonging.

Immigrant experiences play a significant role in shaping their identity and sense of belonging. These experiences are informed, influenced, and constructed through interactions with the established local community, proficiency in the language spoken by the host community, connections established within the city's Latino community, and individuals' ties with their home country. These factors, when woven together, shape how migrants perceive themselves in relation to others and find their sense of place within the community (Hack-Polay et al. 2021; Pugh JD 2018).



**Table 1. Factors influencing immigrant experiences and their impact on Identity and Sense of Belonging**

<b>Factors Influencing immigrant experiences</b>	<b>Impact on Identity and Sense of Belonging</b>
Interactions with the local Community	<i>Shape perceptions of self and identity. Positive interactions – foster sense of social integration Negative interactions – contribute to feelings of exclusion and marginalization.</i>
Language Proficiency in Host Community	<i>Influence cultural integration and sense of belonging. Contributes to identity changes and perceptions of oneself.</i>
Connections within the Latino Community	<i>Foster social connections and support networks Access to resources, information, and social support contribute to their overall well-being.</i>
Ties with Home Country	<i>Impact on cultural maintenance and transnational identity. Encourages a multi-dimensional understanding of home and sense of place.</i>

### **Stages of the Immigrant experience**

Immigration involves the acceptance of individuals from other nations into one's community (Zikai Li 2021), leading to significant changes in identity and presenting challenges to a sense of belonging. The process of migrating to a new country necessitates substantial adjustments and adaptations that impact fundamental aspects of individuals' identities. In this study, I propose a conceptualization of the immigration process consisting of four stages: *pre-immigration, arrival, settlement, and long-term residence*.

These four stages come with varying degrees of identity changes and challenges to belongingness. A *low degree* means minimal alterations in the immigrants' cultural practices, language proficiencies, and social interactions during a particular stage of the immigration process. It suggests that immigrants' core identity remains relatively stable, with only minor adjustments required. At this level, immigrants encounter few obstacles or difficulties in establishing a sense of belonging during a particular stage of the immigration process. In other words, immigrants experience a relatively smooth integration into the new community, with minimal barriers to build social connections and feeling accepted by others.

A *medium degree* indicates a moderate transformation in immigrants' cultural practices, language use, and social behaviors. It suggests that immigrants undergo noticeable adaptations and adjustments to their identity during a specific stage of the immigration process, while still maintaining some elements of their original cultural identity. For belongingness, it indicates a moderate level of hurdles and difficulties faced by immigrants in developing a sense of belonging. It suggests that immigrants may encounter some obstacles, such as language barriers, cultural differences, or initial difficulties in finding housing, employment, and navigating unfamiliar systems. While they may face some challenges, immigrants still have opportunities to build social connections and establish a sense of belonging over time.

*High levels* for identity formation means a significant and substantial transformation in immigrants' cultural practices, language proficiency, and social interactions. It implies that immigrants experience profound shifts in their identity, often incorporating new cultural behaviors, adopting different social norms, and undergoing substantial adjustments to their sense of self. However, for belongingness, this suggests significant and substantial obstacles that immigrants face in establishing a sense of belonging during a specific stage of the immigration

process. It shows that immigrants encounter considerable difficulties in integrating into the new community, such as discrimination, marginalization, social exclusion, or a sense of cultural dissonance. These challenges may hinder their ability to build social networks, feel accepted, and establish a strong sense of belonging.

**Table 2. Stages of the Immigrant experience**

<b>Stages of Immigration Process</b>	<b>Level of Identity Changes</b>	<b>Challenges to Belongingness</b>
Pre -immigration	<i>Medium</i>	<i>High</i>
Arrival	<i>Medium</i>	<i>High</i>
Settlement	<i>High</i>	<i>High</i>
Long-term residence	<i>Medium</i>	<i>Low</i>

During the pre-immigration stage, Latinx migrants may experience a medium level of identity changes. They may start to anticipate and prepare for their move to a new place, which can involve adjustments in their cultural practices, language proficiency, and expectations. This stage can also bring a high level of challenges to belongingness, as migrants may grapple with leaving behind familiar environments, social networks, and support systems. They may face uncertainties about their future integration and acceptance in the new community.

Upon arrival, Latinx migrants continue to experience a medium level of identity changes. They may need to adapt to the local culture, language, and social norms, while also preserving aspects of their own cultural identity. Challenges to belongingness remain high at this stage, as migrants face the initial hurdles of finding housing, employment, and navigating unfamiliar

systems. They may encounter language barriers, discrimination, and a sense of disorientation as they adjust to their new surroundings.

The settlement stage is characterized by a high level of identity changes for Latinx migrants. As they establish roots in their host community, they may undergo significant transformations in their cultural practices, language use, and social interactions. They may develop new skills, adopt new cultural behaviors, and navigate various social networks. Challenges to belonging remain high during this stage, as migrants strive to integrate into the local community, build social connections, and establish a sense of belonging. They may face barriers such as discrimination, marginalization, and feelings of cultural dissonance.

In the long-term residence stage, Latinx migrants experience a medium level of identity changes. They have likely established a more stable sense of self, incorporating elements of both their heritage and their experiences in their host country. Challenges to belongingness tend to decrease during this stage, as migrants become more familiar with the community, develop stronger social networks, and find their place within the larger society. They may still face occasional instances of discrimination or cultural tensions, but overall, their sense of belonging is more established.

#### **IV- Methods/Empirical Analysis**

This study draws on participant observation and in-depth interviews with 32 Latinx immigrants who reside in the city of Chicago, USA. I first interviewed 15 immigrants that arrived in the city from 2000s to 2010, subsequently I interviewed 17 participants that arrived after 2021. I conducted the interviews from September 2023 to April 2024 in person throughout different chosen sites.

The in-person interviews also allowed me to spend around 3 hours twice a week at the sites. This allowed me to observe the experiences and interactions of Latinx migrants directly. I gained valuable insights into the context within which their identities are shaped. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the social dynamics, cultural practices, and identity negotiations that take place among Latinx migrants in Chicago.

The participants in this study were selected using purposive or snowball sampling techniques to ensure a diverse range of backgrounds, experiences, and trajectories were represented. The interviews conducted for this research were semi-structured, providing a framework for exploration while allowing participants to share their stories, challenges, and strategies for identity negotiation in their own words. The one-on-one interviews facilitated a confidential environment, enabling participants to express their experiences openly. Open-ended questions were used to encourage participants to provide rich and detailed narratives, shedding light on the complexities and nuances of their identity journeys.

Throughout the interviews, the focus was on comprehending the participants' experiences, identity formation processes, and their perceived sense of belongingness within the Chicago community. Specific questions (see Appendix A) were designed to elicit reflections on cultural heritage, community engagement, experiences of discrimination, and the strategies employed to navigate the challenges encountered. By employing a detailed and comprehensive interview approach, this study aimed to capture the diverse perspectives and lived experiences of Latinx migrants in Chicago.

For my interviews with newly arrived Latinx migrants, I focused my research on the Kenwood, Hyde Park, and South Loop neighborhoods, specifically the Kenwood Police Station, the Lake Shore Hotel Shelter on Lake Shore Drive, and the South Loop police station, in which a

sizable number of migrants are located. The interviews with earlier generations of migrants were focused within a wider range of spaces in the Chicago area, this is because they are settled in different places, scattered across the city either in smaller communities, or neighborhoods. I also used limited participant observation in my research. Attending community meetings, protests, social gatherings, community workshops such as financial literacy workshops. These observations enabled a comprehensive exploration of the complexities surrounding identity and belonging.

I organized and coded my data by major themes that emerged from the interviews and my participant observation. This process involved identifying recurring patterns, ideas, and concepts that were present across the data set. By systematically examining the data, I was able to identify common themes and group them into relevant categories. Furthermore, I paid particular attention to specific aspects that were discussed by the majority of the participants. This approach ensured that my analysis focused on the most prevalent and significant aspects of the participants' experiences. By highlighting these commonly discussed themes, I was able to capture the shared perspectives and experiences of the participants, providing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Table 3. Sample Characteristics

<b>Demographics</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Total Population Interviewed:	32	
Total Male	17	53%
Total Female	14	43%
Trans-nonbinary	1	3%
<b>Age Range</b>		
18-23	6	
24-35	12	
36-55	14	
<b>Education Level</b>		
Less than high school > 18	12	
High-School Diploma/GED > 18	10	
Post-secondary education > 18	10	
<b>Employment Status</b>		
Currently employed	15	
Currently unemployed	17	
<b>Legal Status</b>		
Document/DACA/Green Card/Citizenship	15	
Undocumented	15	
Chose not to respond	1	

## **V- Findings**

This section presents the findings of the study, which aimed to explore the experiences of identity changes, and perceived sense of belongingness among Latinx migrants in the Chicago community. The section begins with an overview of how the factors influenced these changes paired with the different stages of immigration. Subsequently, each factor will be discussed in detail, highlighting key themes, patterns, and variations observed in the participants' experiences and identity formation process. Throughout the chapter, the findings are supported by direct quotations and narratives from the participants, providing a rich and nuanced understanding of their experiences. The findings are also discussed in relation to the existing theoretical framework, highlighting areas of convergence or divergence and contributing to the broader literature on migration, identity, and belongingness.

First, I illustrate how the various stages of the immigration process impact identity formation and sense of belonging. Through the pre-immigration stage, it becomes evident that strong ties with the home country and limited interaction with established communities can contribute to feelings of uncertainty and a sense of being an outsider. This aligns with the initial expectations of my theory.

Furthermore, the experiences during the arrival and settlement phases highlight the importance of social interactions and the adoption of cultural aspects in shaping identity. The fact that migrants in the early 2000s began to adopt certain elements of the host community while maintaining ties to their home country supports the notion that identity is a dynamic and evolving construct influenced by the interplay between different cultural contexts.

These findings also shed light on the challenges faced by migrants in the process of identity formation and integration. Immigrants mention of discrimination and issues of



marginalization during the settlement phase emphasizes the complex nature of identity development and the barriers that Latinx migrants encounter in their quest for belongingness. This provides empirical evidence that supports my theory's assertion of the difficulties faced by migrants in establishing a sense of belonging in a new cultural environment.

**Table 4. Four factors influencing immigration.**

<b>Stages of Immigration</b>	<b>Interactions with Established Communities</b>	<b>Language Proficiency</b>	<b>Connections/Social network with other Latinx</b>	<b>Ties with home country</b>
Pre-immigration	<i>Low</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>High</i>
Arrival	<i>Low</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>High</i>
Settlement	<i>High</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Medium</i>
Long-term residence	<i>High</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>Medium/Low</i>

Table 4 reflects the findings from the interviews I conducted, which align with my theoretical framework. The four factors outlined were consistently present in the majority of responses from low, medium, and high level of importance. During the pre-immigration phase, 75% of the immigrants overall emphasized their strong ties with their home country, relying on family and friends for economic and social support as they prepared for their journey, 25% were either single or did not have any family left back home, 15% mentioned having family or friends in the host country, although their connections and social network were not yet well-established. While the majority expressed willingness and motivation to learn the language of the host country, their proficiency had not yet developed. At this stage, there was limited interaction with established communities in the host country as they had not yet physically arrived in the new

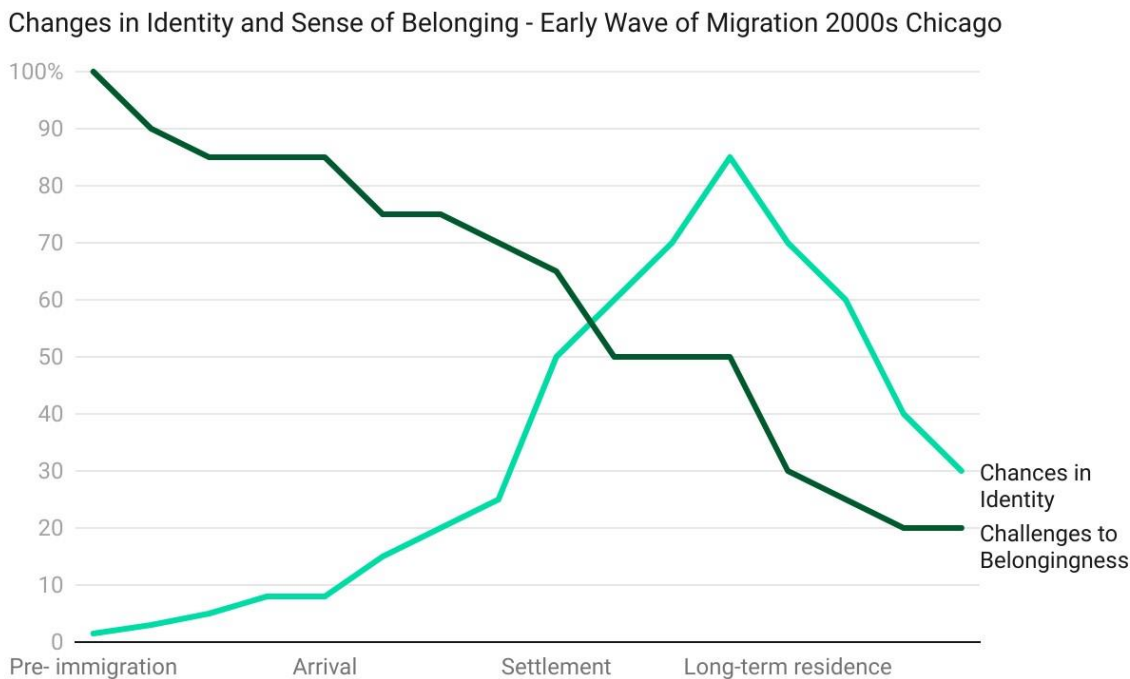
place. Immigrant respondents expressed concern and uncertainty about what to expect and how they would be treated, perceiving themselves as outsiders but hopeful for a warm welcome from the host community. Table 1 indicates that the challenges to belongingness were high, but identity changes was still relatively low.

During the arrival process, immigrants' identities began to take shape through interactions with other Hispanics in the area. Immigrants saw these interactions as crucial for building relationships with individuals in similar situations. Immigrants sought out family or friends already living in the city for assistance in finding jobs and accommodation. While their ties with the home country remained strong, some individuals at this stage began to adopt cultural aspects of the host community. For instance, some took evening ESL classes, joined local service groups, or interacted with members of Catholic churches. Despite improving their communication skills in a foreign language, significant changes in identity were not yet noticed.

In the settlement phase, identities started to undergo changes. Some respondents revealed preferences for either native or local identities, such as identifying as "Chicana" or "Hispanic American." Discrimination challenges were mentioned by 75% of the respondents as they encountered challenges in seeking new job opportunities, facing stigma and issues of marginalization due to their Latinx identity. Finally, during the long-term residence phase, individuals had a clearer understanding of the type of identity they preferred or identified with. In other words, during this phase, the respondents clearly identified being "hispanic-american", or "latino", or "chicano", or "bicultural". Many respondents at this stage expressed feeling settled and ready to start a family, with 45% expressing concerns about long-term residency. The majority were eager to put down roots and start a new life, as some migrants mentioned being "ready to put down roots" in one place. To illustrate the changes and challenges in each phase,

graphs 1 and 2 follow the experiences of immigrants for category. There are close similarities for both waves of migration during the first two phases, while the third and fourth differ in some ways, immigrants in the long-term residence often expressed a sense of stability and settlement in their new environment, they have long-term goals related to career advancements and educational opportunities for themselves or their children.

**Graph 1**

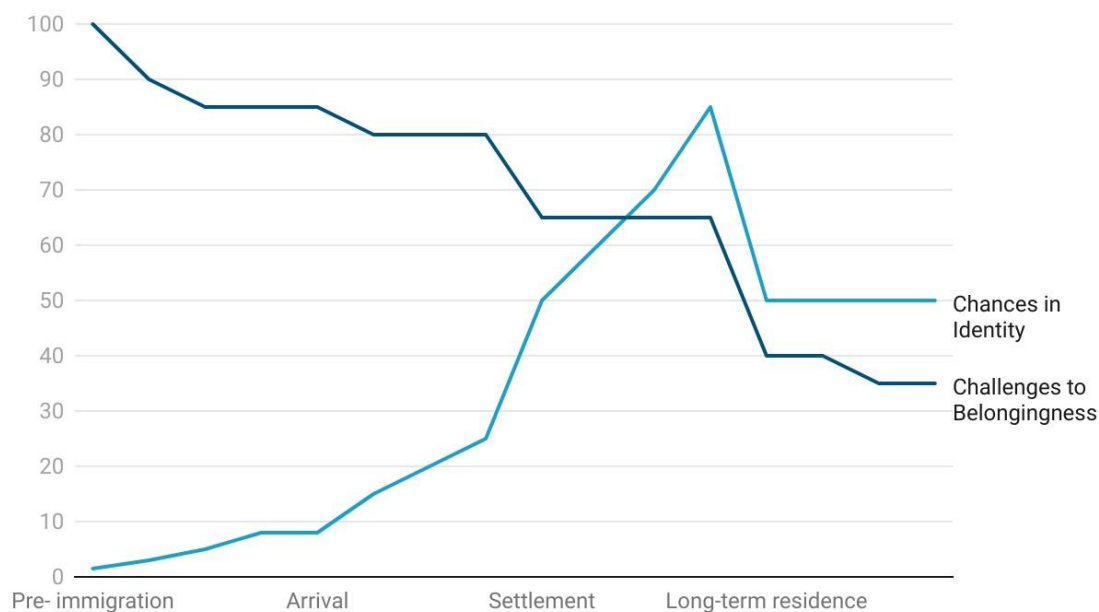


Total Population interviewed: 15

Chart: Martin Roa • Source: Interviews with migrants • Created with Datawrapper

**Graph 2**

Changes in Identity and Sense of Belonging - Newly Arrived (2021-2024) Latinx Migrants Chicago



Total Population: 17

Chart: Martin Roa • Source: Interviews with migrants • Created with Datawrapper

**1- Interactions with the established communities: Positive interactions and acceptance increase a sense of belonging and facilitate the formation and negotiation of identity. Conversely, negative experiences lead to a fragmented or marginalized identity, and hinder sense of belonging.**

The findings of this study reveal a clear relationship between interactions, identity formation and the sense of belonging among Latinx immigrants. Positive interactions, characterized by acceptance and support from the host community, emerged as crucial factor in fostering a strong sense of belonging for both waves. The more positive interaction immigrants have with the community, the more it contributes to perceptions of acceptance, feelings of belonging, and willingness to engage with the community.

The early wave of Latinx migration faced considerable challenges, especially during their arrival and settlement phases. Discrimination and pronounced racial segregation were particularly prevalent during this period, with the post-9/11 era that brought a heightened climate of fear, suspicion, and anti-immigrant sentiment. This period introduced additional obstacles to integration and a sense of belonging in the host community.

In this group, 65% of respondents indicated that discrimination against Latinx migrants, was fueled by stereotypes and xenophobic sentiments, this significantly impacted their experiences and identity negotiation. Latinx immigrants often encountered prejudice, bias, and systemic discrimination in various aspects of their lives, including employment, education, housing, and social interactions. Such discrimination hindered their ability to fully participate in and contribute to the host community, creating barriers to forming a cohesive and integrated identity.

Despite these challenges, positive interactions during their settlement and long-term residence phase played a vital role in fostering a stronger sense of belonging. Overall, more than half the respondents from the early migration wave have had mostly positive interactions that in fact made it easier for them to feel welcome, to engage more with the community, and that gave them access to social networks of other Latinx migrants that function as a support system in navigating their new home. For newly arrived Latinx migrants, however, a similar type of social network did not exist. The absence of an established social network thus made it very difficult for them to find community for support. The majority of interviewees from this wave nonetheless indicated that the broader community is fairly generous here in Chicago. People from different socio-economic and race backgrounds come to the shelters, or police stations to bring all sorts of donations, goods, and sometimes, even lawyers come in to offer their services.

These positive interactions with the community during their arrival phase are crucial to how they perceive their new environment, and how they begin to negotiate a new identity.

To illustrate, one of the respondents, Rosa (32)<sup>3</sup>, who arrived in Chicago in 2001, shared that finding community support while looking for jobs, and getting guidance to find her way around the Pilsen neighborhood made her feel welcomed, and fostered a new sense of belonging within a close-knit Mexican community.

"When I got here, I felt alone, away from my family and friends, I had no idea how to communicate with the people here. But there was a big Mexican community in Pilsen during those years, and they helped me navigate the area, a very good friend of mine, she is Mexican as well, taught me how to take the public transportation, showed me the markets around, and even helped me get a job at a factory, I felt welcomed by her, and started dreaming about calling this place home."

Another participant, Karina (39), who arrived to Chicago in 2003 mentioned how shared tradition of folklore Ballet allowed her to make strong connections with others from her country, and the Latino population within the city.

"I love folklore dance, I have been doing it for many years since I was back home, sharing my tradition allowed me to connect with others from the community, and I made really good friends through my dancing years. Tradition is very important to me, and I love sharing it with other people, I feel seen, I feel accepted, and that contributes to my sense of belonging here." She also added, "when my neighbors invited me to their gatherings,

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<sup>3</sup> To protect their identities, the names I used to refer to specific individuals are fictional, the age data is accurate.

asked about my traditions, and genuinely embraced my presence, I felt a genuine sense of belonging. It gave me the confidence to fully embrace my identity as a Latinx immigrant and actively participate in the community sharing my culture through dancing."

Positive interactions for newly arrived Latinx immigrants are less present, they don't have every day, yet these sporadic interactions provide a sense of safety and willingness of the host community to accept them. Carlos (25), staying at the Lake Shore Shelter in Hyde Park emphasized the importance of support networks in navigating legal challenges and finding a sense of belonging within the Latinx community.

"Right now, is very difficult for us to think about the future, we don't know anything about the process here, there is no one in charge, and information is scarce. Sometimes someone from an NGO that helps the immigrants come in and help us filling out paperwork to get the work authorization we need, but we are told that could take many months. We are also looking into applying for asylum, but the process is long, and we don't have any legal representation. I talked to a lawyer last week, who came here to help, and that gave me some hope. Some people here can be really nice, and it helps feeling the support from the community."

Another person I interviewed, Eugenia (34), said that she felt included when they allowed her to send her children to school.

"I was so happy to know that I could send my children to school, they take classes in English, but they have a translator that helps them learn the content in Spanish. They are also taking ESL classes, and I feel that this will help them a lot making friends at school, and also helping me with my English [laughs]."

On the other hand, Latinx immigrants who arrived in the early 2000s faced numerous obstacles that undermined their sense of belonging. Discrimination and exclusion played a prominent role in their negative experiences during their arrival and settlement phase. Mauro (28) shared his encounter with workplace discrimination. Despite his qualifications as a mechanic, he faced prejudice and bias because he couldn't communicate well in English, leading to feelings of frustration and alienation. These negative interactions in the workplace hindered his ability to fully integrate into the host society and develop a sense of belonging.

“When I first got here, my cousin got me a job as mechanic, back in Mexico I had my own shop, and I was very good at what I did, I worked in the industry for almost 15 years, and never had any issues. But working as immigrant here, my work was not valued because I couldn't communicate in English, and sometimes they did not want to pay me what I was asking for, just because I was a foreigner, there has been many times that I was frustrated and almost quit”.

Luis (32) highlighted the challenges of social exclusion. He recounted instances of being treated differently and facing prejudice in his daily interactions. In his workplace, he noticed that he was often overlooked for promotions and opportunities, despite his qualifications and hard work. He felt excluded from important decision-making processes and experienced a lack of support from colleagues. These instances of social exclusion left Luis feeling undervalued and isolated, hindering his ability to fully integrate into the workplace community and develop a sense of belonging.

In his daily interactions outside of work, Luis also faced prejudice and discrimination. He recounted instances where he was subjected to derogatory comments and stereotyping based on



his ethnicity and immigrant status. These negative interactions made him feel like an outsider and created a sense of otherness. Instead of being treated as an equal member of society, he experienced marginalization and felt excluded from the broader community. This constant exposure to prejudice eroded his confidence and made him question his worth, ultimately impacting his overall well-being and his sense of belonging.

Latinx immigrants who have recently arrived also encounter negative interactions that impede their sense of belonging. Laura (26), when asked about her experience regarding housing allocation, expressed:

“This is such a difficult situation, we are all here in the police station sleeping on the floor, some are sleeping in tents outside, but we don’t have anywhere to go, and they are not giving us any information about the possibility of being moved to a shelter. I don’t know anyone here, some people have cousins or family here that they can go to, but I came here alone, and I’m scared that they will just put me out on the streets soon.”

The absence of any coordination, and lack of information are prominent obstacles for newly arrived Latinx migrants, it affects not only their physical well-being but also contributes to a fragmented sense of belonging, as they are made to feel unwelcome in their new environment.

These negative interactions created a hostile environment for Luis, instilling fear, and mistrust, and further isolating them from the broader community. Such experiences hinder their sense of belonging, as they are constantly reminded of their outsider status.

The different experiences of these individuals reflect the common challenges faced by many Latinx immigrants who encounter social exclusion and prejudice when they first arrive in the city. Much like Luis, Maria, Karina, others continue to experience workplace discrimination, or prejudices on the streets, these negative interactions happen to a greater extent during the

arrival and settlement phases, they re-enforce negative perceptions and attitudes among the migrants, and some are more reluctant to engage with the community because they fear of being rejected, it also hinders their professional growth and limit their opportunities for advancement. Moreover, immigrants that face daily instances of prejudice and stereotyping, are left with feelings of marginalization, impeding their sense of belonging within the broader community. These feelings of exclusion make it more difficult for people to integrate within the host community.

**2- Community ties within the Hispanic community in Chicago matter: stronger community ties, and shared experiences foster a sense of belonging, stronger bonds facilitate a cohesive and integrated identity.**

Strong community ties provide opportunities for interaction, engagement, and shared experiences among members of the Hispanic community. These interactions can take place through social gatherings, cultural events, religious institutions, community organizations, or neighborhood networks. Through these connections, individuals can develop a sense of shared identity, cultural pride, and a feeling of being part of a larger collective.

In his research, Jeffrey Pugh argued that immigrants usually engage in an “invisibility bargain” behavior where they negotiate their acceptance, tolerance, and assimilation within a community, giving up their political participation, and social visibility. In other words, immigrants minimize their visibility within their host country, build informal coalitions with non-state networks to avoid citizen backlash against them (Pugh, 2018). However, I found that Latinx migrants in Chicago are anything but invisible.

The visibility of their identity is pronounced and well established, the encounter with others is more salient in shaping their identity negotiation and sense of belonging. I found that the stronger the ties are with other members of the Hispanic community, their feelings of belonging increase, and they are more likely to stay in the city for subsequent years. This is indicative of a strong sense of belonging, as they choose to be part of the community, and form a family.

Mario (26), "When I first arrived in Chicago in the early 2000s, it was a completely new environment for me. I didn't know anyone here, and I had to start from scratch. But I was lucky to have a cousin who had already been living in the city for a few years. He introduced me to his group of friends, all of whom were Hispanic like me. We instantly clicked and formed a tight-knit community."

Latinx migrants in Chicago exhibit a pronounced visibility of their identity, actively engaging with the community and establishing their presence. Interactions and encounters with others play a significant role in identity negotiation, allowing migrants to navigate challenges of acceptance, and tolerance, while still maintaining their visibility. Additionally, strong community ties provide the necessary social support, cultural preservation, and mutual assistance, creating a network that enhances their well-being and connection.

Romeo (42): "The community here is like a big family. We support each other, celebrate our traditions, and help one another in times of need. It feels like home."

Carlos (32): "Being involved in community events and organizations allows me to contribute to something bigger than myself. It gives me a sense of belonging and purpose."

Magdalena (43): "I feel proud of my heritage and being part of this community. We keep our traditions alive, and it gives us a sense of identity and belonging that is really special."

The experiences of immigrants with members of the community who shared similar backgrounds were present all throughout the interviews. This highlights the importance of community ties within the Hispanic community in fostering a sense of belonging. The visibility of their identity is pronounced, and they actively engage with the community, forming close-knit relationships and establishing a presence. These interactions and encounters with others play a significant role in the negotiation of their identity, allowing them to navigate challenges of acceptance and tolerance while maintaining their visibility.

The strong community ties provide social support, cultural preservation, and mutual assistance, creating a network that enhances their well-being and connection. As individuals build denser ties with the Hispanic community, their feelings of belonging increase, and their sense of self becomes more established. This is evident in the accounts of participants who emphasize the sense of family, pride in heritage, and the sense of purpose derived from being part of the community.

*Connection/Social network with other Latinx migrants: inform the formation and reshaping of identity and sense of belonging in the host community.*

One of my findings is consistent with transnational theory, in that the majority of the people interviewed identified with one or more type of identity, the majority of them continued to be attached to their home countries, even after years of living and settling here in Chicago. Most of the respondents say they are still either "Mexicans" or "Guatemalan" or "Salvadoran", but they also have embraced cultural elements of the host country, such as language, etc.

One reason that contributed to these developments is directly linked with Schiller's idea that existing social networks are important and influence the way in which they learn and adapt

within the new environment. They learn specifically from other Latinx migrants that have lived here before them, settled migrants pass down essential information about how they learned things, how they should navigate communication challenges, they help newcomers to get jobs in factories, etc.

However, some respondents do acknowledge feelings of not fully adapting to the new culture, and at the same time they no longer see themselves going back to their home country. What is interesting about these experiences is that, during the second and third phases, many within the first wave (75%) start to develop a new type of identity, a bicultural type, in which they adopt cultural element of the host community, while holding onto to much of their home countries', another significant portion of interviews also develop notions of identity that is neither ethnic nor bicultural, but one constructed from their own experiences, that are particular to how they see themselves in relations to the community. This new type of identity is an amalgam of different elements that they choose to adopt. For instance, in one interview with a woman that came here from Mexico when she was 3 years old, she said: "I am neither Mexican, nor American. I am "Chicana". She said, "for me being Chicana, is not being fully Mexican, but I do have Mexican parents, some Mexican culture, but I am not Mexican, I don't feel Mexican. At the same time, even though I grew up here, I am not American. I feel connected to this country, and Chicago is what I call home, but don't see myself as fully American, that is why I say, I am 'Chicana.'"

Other types of identity in migrants who arrived here in the early 2000s are the so called "hyphenated identities", in which these individuals engage in bicultural practices in which they jump from one culture to another when they deem it necessary. For instance, over half of the respondents from earlier waves indicated to enjoy food from their home countries, and they still

practice rituals, religious observations, and wear some ethnic clothing. At the same time, their view on politics have changed from being more conservative, to having a more inclusive view on social issues, for instance, they strongly support "open borders for immigrants", or they support "gay marriage" to some extent.

These individuals have a strong sense of belonging here, they mentioned explicitly that this is their home now, the majority does not want to go back to their home country, but they do maintain strong ties from families back home.

**3- Proficiency in the language of the host country grants immigrant greater agency to integrate elements from both their country of origin and the host community, thereby shaping their identity and fostering a stronger sense of belonging.**

The interviews I conducted revealed that 70% of those who acquired higher language proficiency during their arrival and settlement phases experienced a notable increase in social interactions, particularly during their long-term residence phase. One respondent mentioned that by learning the language spoken by the predominant community, he was better equipped to communicate and engage with people from diverse backgrounds. In other words, their ability to converse with varying degrees of fluency facilitated meaningful connections, enabling immigrants to build relationships and establish a sense of belonging within the community. This heightened engagement in social interactions played a significant role in their overall integration.

Moreover, learning the language from the predominant community had a profound impact on the cultural understanding and identity negotiation of Latinx immigrants. I found that as individuals became more proficient in the language spoken by the receiving society, they not only developed a deeper comprehension of its cultural nuances, values, and norms but also engaged in a process of identity negotiation. One interviewee, Maria (32), explained how

learning English through ESL classes at night allowed her to better navigate between her Mexican heritage and the host community way of living. She was able to develop a dynamic interaction with non-hispanic people in her neighborhood, and even married a “white person”, and now has two children growing up in a multicultural family.

Latinx immigrants navigate between their country of origin and the host community, incorporating elements from both to construct their sense of self. Language proficiency provided at least to 70% of the respondents from the early wave, the tools to express their unique cultural backgrounds while adapting to the customs and practices of the host community, there are some respondents who have not learned English since they arrived because of their own choosing, their age, or lack of opportunities. For the newly arrived immigrants, 90% responded that learning the host community’s language is important to be able to access jobs, housing, and even pay bills.

Immigrants shape their identity as they increase their language proficiency, integrating various aspects of their heritage and the new cultural context they found themselves in. This ongoing process of identity negotiation allowed Latinx immigrants to create a multi-dimensional and dynamic sense of self that reflected their experiences, cultural heritage, and interactions within the host community.

Language proficiency played a pivotal role in accessing employment opportunities for Latinx immigrants in Chicago. I found that as individuals improved their language skills, they were more capable of effectively communicating with employers, colleagues, and customers. This linguistic competence opened doors to a wider range of job prospects, enhancing their chances of securing employment.

Learning the language from the predominant community had a profound impact on the cultural understanding of Latinx immigrants. As individuals became more proficient in the language spoken by the receiving society, they developed a deeper comprehension of its cultural nuances, values, and norms.

I also found that learning the language from the predominant community significantly influenced a stronger sense of belonging among Latinx immigrants. Language proficiency empowered individuals to navigate daily life with greater ease, participate in community activities, and express their opinions and needs effectively. This active involvement and engagement in the receiving society fostered a sense of belonging, as immigrants felt connected to and valued within their new community. Consequently, a stronger sense of belonging contributed to their overall integration and well-being.

## **VI- Discussion**

I argued that while the process of integration is complex and multifaceted, there are factors and evidence to suggest that immigrants do indeed sustain a steady process of social integration. Language proficiency is a critical aspect of this integration. I show that over time, immigrants tend to improve their language skills in the host country's language. This enables better communication, access to education and employment opportunities, and increased social interaction with the local population. The ability to effectively communicate in the host country's language is a key indicator of integration.

Immigrants often make significant progress in accessing education and employment opportunities as they integrate into the host society. Second-generation immigrants might achieve higher levels of education and occupational attainment compared to their parents; however, this aspect requires further research. An upward mobility indicates the integration



process, as immigrants and their children contribute to the host country's workforce and economy.

Furthermore, they build social networks within their communities and with members of the host society. These networks provide social support, information, and opportunities for social engagement (Polzer 2009). Over time, immigrants expand their social circles and develop friendships and connections with individuals from diverse backgrounds. Inclusion in social networks is indicative of integration and social cohesion.

Immigrants often adapt and navigate the cultural norms and practices of the host society. They may adopt aspects of the local culture while also preserving their own cultural heritage. This blend of cultural influences demonstrates the ability to navigate and contribute to multiple cultural contexts, showcasing the integration process.

My findings showed that the conditions explored in this research are necessary, however not necessarily sufficient for a successful integration with the host community. Building on Fearon's (1992) argument that identity is constantly evolving, my research aligns with the concept of Identity Process theory, which emphasizes that immigrants engage in an ongoing negotiation of their identities based on personal experiences and various contextual factors. In particular, my findings highlight the experiences of Latinx migrants, who exhibit remarkable adaptability, resilience, and a strong willingness to establish transnational relationships. These factors, as illustrated in graphs 1 and 2, ultimately contribute to the enhancement of their identity and foster a greater sense of belonging.

Moreover, my study reveals what Fearon does not take into consideration, that the forging of transnational relations by Latinx migrants serves as a bridge that connects their countries of origin and their host countries. This transnational engagement allows for the

exchange of ideas, resources, and cultural practices, creating networks that transcend geographical boundaries. These connections not only facilitate the integration of Latinx migrants into their host societies but also contribute to the development of mutually beneficial relationships between countries.

Kebede's (2010) argument that establishing a sense of belonging involves the continual process of forming and reforming identities holds true, especially in the case of forced migrants. These individuals undergo transformative journeys that require them to negotiate their identities and relationships with different communities. I emphasize however, that the ongoing formation and negotiation of identities are particularly salient during the arrival and settlement phases of immigrant integration. It is within these two stages that identity and feelings of belonging are the most present.

Furthermore, the use of the term “transmigrants” becomes appropriate to denote an intrinsic relationship within immigrants’ sense of self and the broader characteristics that makes them, as well as the multiple relationships that span borders (Santiago-Irizarry 2008; Rouse, 1992). Over time, as shown in the graphs, Latinx migrants engender the local culture and customs, and integrate into their new environment while still maintaining attachments to their home countries.

The concept of dual identities, as proposed by Social Identity Theory, is an interesting result, however unsurprising. It was evident among the respondents in the interview that immigrants make choices about how to express their identities, influenced by cultural adaptation, social context, and personal preferences (Carpentier and Sablonniere 2013). Some maintain their original identity, while others adapt to fit their new environment. The findings regarding the coexistence of dual identities support this understanding.

Interestingly, a new aspect of divergence from previous theories emerges in my findings. Some respondents develop a new type of identity that is neither ethnic nor solely bicultural. This unique identity emerges from their lived experiences and incorporates various elements from both home and their “new home” that they choose to adopt. This aspect incorporates a broader understanding of how immigrants develop their own distinct identities, shaped by their journeys, and one that is not confined only to ethnic or cultural categories.

The process of immigrant integration occurs in various ways and degrees, influenced by factors such as language proficiency, social networks, and ties with the community. These components inform and contribute to the formation and negotiation of immigrant identities. Schiller's idea that existing social networks play a crucial role in immigrant integration is consistent with the findings of this research. My data analysis reveals that settled migrants pass down essential information and provide support to newcomers, thereby facilitating their learning, adaptation, and integration within the new environment. This underscores the significance of social networks in the process of identity formation and negotiation.

Promoting cultural exchange, challenging stereotypes, and building bridges of understanding are essential for creating a more inclusive society that embraces the diverse experiences and identities of Latinx immigrants through fostering dialogue and mutual understanding between communities.

Lastly, upon close examination, and analysis, this research give depth to the understanding of immigrant identity formation and sense of belonging. My research explored different factors that influence its formation, and how this subsequently makes or breaks migrant integration into the community. However, this should not be the end of all understanding about the way in which identity can be negotiated, or what makes a place feel like home. Further

considerations should be given to how the perceptions from the local community affect the immigrants sense of belonging, and ways in which it could hinder integration. Negative attitudes towards immigrants are possible avenues for future research.

## **Limitations**

While these data provide us with considerable details to understand the relationship between immigrant experiences, identity formation, and a sense of belonging, there are several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, it is important to note that the interviews conducted in this research were specific to the Latinx immigrant population. Therefore, the findings may not fully capture the experiences and identity formation processes of immigrants from different cultural backgrounds. Immigrants from diverse backgrounds may have distinct experiences and face unique challenges that were not explored within the scope of this study. Future research should aim to include a broader range of immigrant populations to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of identity negotiation and belonging.

Second, it is important to acknowledge that the sample size of this study was relatively small, consisting of only 32 participants. While the data obtained from these interviews provided valuable insights into the experiences of Latinx migrants and their identity formation, it is crucial to recognize that the findings may not be fully representative of the entire population of Latinx migrants. The small sample size limits the generalizability of the results and may not capture the full diversity of experiences and perspectives within the Latinx immigrant community. Future research with larger and more diverse samples would enable a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of identity negotiation and belonging among Latinx migrants, allowing for more robust conclusions and broader application of the findings.

Third, the research focused on specific phases of the immigrant journey, namely the pre-immigration, arrival, settlement, and long-term residence phases. Other important phases, such as repatriation or reintegration, were not explored. Understanding the dynamics of identity negotiation and sense of belonging throughout the entire trajectory of the immigrant experience would provide a more comprehensive picture.

Despite these limitations, this research contributes to the existing literature on immigrant identity formation and sense of belonging among Latinx migrants. It highlights the multi-dimensional nature of the process and emphasizes the importance of considering individual experiences, social interactions, and contextual factors. Immigrant experiences do inform self-perception, positive interactions with the community allows immigrants to feel welcomed, and valued by the host community, as therefore they are more likely to engage and form a stronger sense of belonging.

## **VII- Conclusion**

The study reveals that identities are not fixed or uniform, but rather continuously shaped through lived experiences. Identity formation is a complex process that involves the way individuals perceive and make sense of themselves in relation to others. It encompasses how individuals define and interpret their own sense of self and how they are perceived by and relate to others.

Identities are shaped through lived experiences, which can include interactions with family, friends, communities, and broader societal contexts. These experiences provide individuals with a framework through which they construct their identities, incorporating aspects such as culture, language, values, beliefs, and social roles.

Their sense of belonging is closely tied to positive or negative interactions with the host community. Positive interactions make it easier for Latinx immigrants to feel welcome, to engage more with the community, and that gives them access to social networks of other Latinx migrants that function as a support system in navigating their new home. Conversely, negative interactions foster a sense of exclusion and segregation, resulting in varying degrees of integration.

Latinx immigrants go through four stages of their immigration journey. I have conceptualized these stages within four main frames: pre-immigration, arrival, settlement, and long-term residence. Within these frames, there are four main factors that were recurring themes of influence for the respondents, (1) interactions with the established local community, (2) language proficiency of the host community, (3) community ties within the Hispanic community in Chicago, (4) and ties with their home country.

During the pre-immigration phase, immigrants relied on their strong ties with their home country and expressed concerns about their reception in the host community. The arrival process marked the beginning of interactions with other Hispanics and the adoption of cultural aspects of the host community, while significant changes in identity were not yet observed.

In the settlement phase, immigrants experienced identity changes and encountered challenges related to discrimination and marginalization. However, they also revealed preferences for native or local identities, reflecting a sense of belonging and connection to their new environment. Finally, in the long-term residence phase, immigrants had a clearer understanding of their preferred identities, such as "Hispanic-American" or "Chicana." They expressed a sense of stability, readiness to start a family, and a focus on long-term goals for themselves and their children.

I proposed a novel approach to understanding migrant integration, forged, and based on their own journey and experience. This is important, because it puts individuals at the center of the conversation, beyond mere understanding of economic, social, and cultural influences. Immigrants themselves have agency, and how they negotiate their identity and develop their sense of belonging is contingent upon each individual experience.

Finally, future research should aim to address these limitations, employing larger and more diverse samples, utilizing mixed-method approaches, and exploring the complete trajectory of the immigrant experience to further enhance our understanding of immigrant identity dynamics and their implications. As the title of this research suggests, an immigrant's journey from their homeland to a new home is complex, and it informs the way in which their identity is manifested, as well as the ways in which they negotiate their sense of place. Scholars should focus more on their lived experiences beyond mere socio-economic factors.

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## Appendix A

### Possible Interview Questions:

What is your country of origin?

What motivated you to migrate to Chicago?

How long have you been living in Chicago?

#### **Migration Experience:**

Can you describe your journey or process of migrating to Chicago? (e.g., route, challenges faced, support received)

How does your experience of migrating to Chicago compare to your expectations before coming here?

What were the primary reasons for choosing Chicago as your destination?

#### **Identity and Cultural Heritage:**

How do you maintain a connection to your cultural heritage while adapting to your new environment in Chicago?

Have you encountered any challenges or conflicts related to balancing your cultural identity with adapting to the local culture? If yes, please explain.

Are there any specific cultural practices or traditions that you have introduced or shared with the local community in Chicago?

#### **Sense of Belonging:**

How do you establish a sense of belonging in Chicago? Are there any specific activities or communities that have helped you feel more connected?

Have you faced any difficulties in forming relationships or integrating into the local community? If yes, please elaborate.

Are there any resources or support networks that have been particularly helpful in fostering your sense of belonging in Chicago?

#### **Perceptions and Experiences:**

How have you perceived the attitudes of the local community towards Latinx migrants in Chicago?

Have you encountered any instances of discrimination or prejudice? If yes, how did you handle such situations?



Have you had positive interactions with members of the local community? If yes, please provide examples.

**Support and Services:**

What types of support or assistance have you received since arriving in Chicago? (e.g., housing, language support, employment assistance)

How would you rate the availability and accessibility of support services for Latinx migrants in Chicago?

Are there any additional support services or resources you believe would be beneficial for Latinx migrants?

**Comparison with Earlier Waves of Migration:**

Do you perceive any differences between your experience as a migrant in Chicago and the experiences of earlier waves of Latinx migrants? If yes, please explain.

How do you think the recent surge in Latinx migration has impacted community dynamics and the formation of collective identities in Chicago?