

MEXICAN COMMUNITIES IN THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Tadeo Weiner Davis

Introduction

It is tempting to think of history at the level of an event: A led to B, which led to C. But events are shaped by multiple forces. People amass themselves into groups, form social and economic institutions, and take the actions which comprise historical events. As social workers and street-level bureaucrats, we are uniquely positioned within these historical events. We do our jobs at the interface between the institutions charged with policy development and those tasked with policy implementation. As social workers, therefore, we are actors playing a role in implementing change and shaping history. We would do well, then, to study this history more carefully to better understand the development of current events and our role in them. Studying history can better equip us to disrupt systems of oppression before they permanently affect people's lives.

Social workers serve some of the most marginalized and vulnerable individuals in society, and do so while straddling the line between social work and social control. Immigrants are often recipients of social work services and targets of oppressive social control. The latter is true regardless of the political party in the White House—President Obama, for example, removed over three million immigrants from the United States during his presidency, more than the number removed under Presidents Bush and Clinton combined (Chishti, Pierce, & Bolter, 2017). With the exception of some advocacy groups, few protested Obama's removals, mostly because the White House claimed to target individuals with serious criminal records. Many of the Obama policies created the infrastructure for increased deportations under which the Trump administration is capitalizing. The current White House has announced that it will hire 10,000 additional immigration and customs agents "to seek the deportation of anyone in the country illegally... [t]hat includes people convicted of fraud in any official matter before a governmental agency and people who 'have abused any program related to receipt of public benefits'" (Shear & Nixon, 2017). Social workers, many of whom

work with individuals directly targeted by these policies, now have to decide what actions to take in this new political climate. Anti-oppressive social work calls us to engage in critical self-reflection and assessment of people's experiences with oppression historically and contemporaneously (Morgaine & Capous-Desyllas, 2015). This essay hopes to foment such historical reflection.

It is not the first time elected officials and citizens have called for the ejection of marginalized people from the United States. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, there were similar calls for the mass removal of immigrants. Despite the presence of a diverse immigrant body, then as now, the deportation debate mostly focused on Mexicans and Mexican Americans.

In what follows, I show that the inclusion of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in poverty relief at the beginning of the Great Depression varied according to time and location, from semi-limited access to wholesale exclusion and removal from the United States. First, I explain the presence of a transient and precarious Mexican labor force, a particularly vulnerable population, in the years leading up to the Great Depression. I then recount broad trends in the Mexican experience during the Great Depression, including repatriation, deportation, and variation in relief patterns across the country at the time. Finally, I take a closer look at Mexican communities in the Southwest, Los Angeles, and Detroit to gain a better historical perspective on particular relief experiences. Throughout the essay, the reader will note the role of various actors, including some who self-identified as social workers.

MEXICAN LABOR IN THE UNITED STATES PRIOR TO THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Immigration levels from Mexico prior to 1900 were extremely low (Gratton & Merchant, 2013). Both the United States and Mexico had agricultural economies, and in Mexico, "over 90 percent of the people liv[ed] on farms, ranches, or in rural villages" (Balderrama & Rodriguez, 2006, p. 12). But Mexico's population increased significantly at the turn of the 20th century under the "modernization programs" of Porfirio Diaz. These programs disrupted the "traditional land and labor systems" and improved transportation and communication, creating "increasingly mobile communities" (Gratton & Merchant, 2013, p. 946).

Balderrama and Rodriguez (2006) explain how millions of people lost access to their land, prompting new patterns of increased migration:

Mexico experienced an expanding land monopoly controlled by a few rich agriculturalists, commonly referred to as *hacendados*. These individuals were often foreign or absentee landowners living in Mexico City, the U.S., or Europe. Aided by favorable government legislation and a sympathetic legal system, these land barons acquired massive tracts of Mexico's national domain as well as control of *ejidos*, lands formerly farmed collectively. (p.12)

The loss of land and the restructuring of agricultural markets caused widespread hunger and malnutrition across the Mexican countryside (Balderrama & Rodriguez, 2006). The Mexican Revolution of 1910 compounded the economic effects of Diaz's land reforms as almost all traditional Mexican institutions were challenged and various revolutionary factions emerged in the fight to rule Mexico (Balderrama & Rodriguez, 2006). While these economic and political changes pushed people to migrate out of Mexico, economic development in the American Southwest and changes in U.S. immigration legislation at the federal level "pulled" Mexican labor north.

The labor-intensive agricultural industry in the Southwest of the United States came along with the development of a modern irrigation system, and the demand for labor could not be met by an indigenous or African-descendant population (Fox, 2010). The same was true of growing industries in the region. Sometimes, U.S. companies directly "transported Mexican employees across the border to American plants and facilities" (Balderrama & Rodriguez, 2006, p. 17), as in the case of Anaconda Copper, which transported Mexican employees to southern Arizona. Even the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS), "at times resistant to agribusiness demands, more often facilitated illegal crossings to benefit growers" (Gratton & Merchant, 2013, p. 967) and avoided deportation sweeps during peak harvest season.

It is important to note that most of those who immigrated for work did not intend to stay, but rather followed the agricultural harvest season in a circular migratory pattern between the United States and Mexico (Gratton & Merchant, 2013; Balderrama & Rodriguez, 2006). People moved back and forth easily; the border was not clearly demarcated and "hardly existed except in people's imaginations" (Massey, 2006, p. 1). Still, *colonias* of Mexican laborers, akin to European immigrant enclaves in the North and Midwest, were established (Balderrama & Rodriguez, 2006).

World War I caused further labor-demand changes throughout the country (Gratton & Merchant, 2013). Immigration restrictions from Asia and Europe in the 1920s further deepened the need for other sources of labor, and Mexican workers expanded to the north (Balderrama & Rodriguez, 2006. Figure 1, adapted from data in Gratton and Merchant (2013), shows the resulting population changes.)

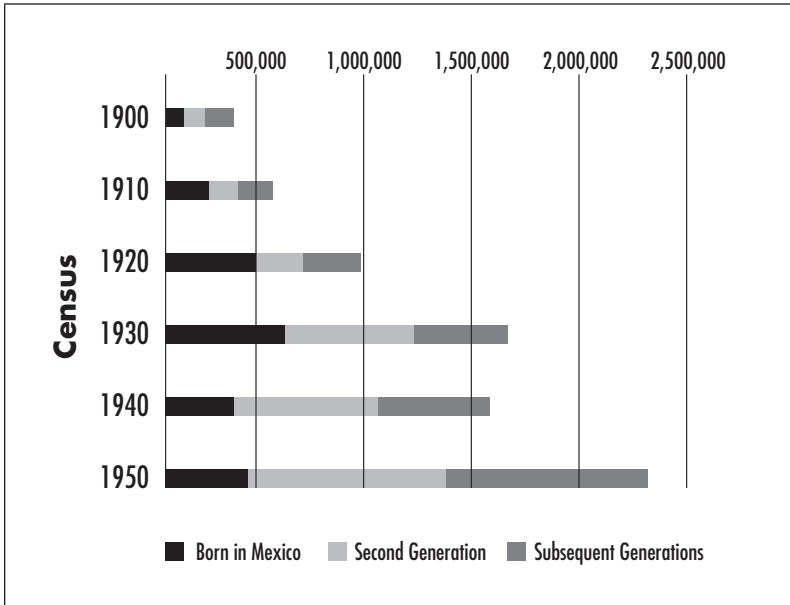


Figure 1. Mexican Origin Persons in the U.S. by Generation. This figure illustrates the number of Mexican origin persons in the U.S., by generation, between 1900 and 1950. “Second Generation” refers to people born in the U.S. with at least one parent born in Mexico. “Subsequent Generations” refers to people born in the U.S. and both parents born in the U.S., but identified as Mexican-origin. Data adapted from Gratton & Merchant (2013).

MEXICAN COMMUNITIES IN THE GREAT DEPRESSION

The economic and social effects of the Great Depression devastated families across the country. Growing inequality, as evidenced by the hidden poverty of the 1920s, and the inherently unstable and unregulated economy combined with “the aging of the population...the

depletion of the soil culminating in the Dust Bowl...and the increase in the labor force” to create the biggest economic contraction the country had ever seen (Patterson, 2000, p. 40). President Roosevelt’s statement that one third of the nation was “ill housed, ill clad, and ill nourished” was conservative—the percentage “was closer to 40 or 50 percent” (Patterson, 2000, p. 41). It is difficult to assess the level of hardship at the time as the federal government did not use official poverty measures until later in the century.

Due to the unprecedented nature and scope of the economic collapse, many people believed that “private charities...and private pension plans...could cope with the situation” (Patterson, 2000, p. 55). Accordingly, increases and innovation in public aid were slow. As the situation became increasingly dire, President Roosevelt and the Congress created two broad sets of experimental projects, programs, and legislation known collectively as the First and Second New Deals to soften the economic impact on people. The Keynesian New Deals included job placements, categorical assistance, and industrial, agricultural, and financial regulations (Patterson, 2000). However, not all communities benefited equally from these programs and the early welfare state served communities differently depending on race and occupation.

It should be noted that no New Deal program explicitly barred noncitizens or unauthorized immigrants from assistance. Secretary of Labor Perkins and Harry Hopkins, members of the Committee on Economic Security (CES) charged with drafting New Deal legislation, believed that noncitizens should have access to assistance (Fox, 2016)—it was not until the early 1970s that all social programs at the federal level explicitly barred unauthorized immigrants from accessing poverty relief (Fox, 2016). However, occupations were used as a tool of distinction and exclusion. Fox (2016) explains that the Social Security Act of 1935

barred agricultural and domestic workers from social security benefits and unemployment insurance, thereby disqualifying large number of blacks, Mexicans, and other minorities for these benefits and forcing them to rely disproportionately on means-tested cash assistance programs such as Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) or Old Age Assistance (OAA). (p. 1055)

Mexicans and Mexican Americans were thus largely excluded from much of the early safety net because they disproportionately worked in agricultural jobs.

While unauthorized immigrants were not technically excluded from assistance by federal statute, they still did not have broad access to public assistance. Fox (2016) recounts that “durational residency restrictions barred recent state residents, including recent immigrants, from assistance” (p. 1057). As long as immigrants could prove continuous residency in a county for a determined amount of time, they could count on support. But few Mexican immigrants qualified for relief even under these criteria, since most were transient and followed the agriculture-based migratory pattern created by economic forces on both sides of the border (Fox, 2016). One New Deal program that did bar immigrants was the WPA and its projects, which were assigned to U.S. citizens only (Balderrama & Rodriguez, 2006). Since only 5 to 13 percent of Mexican immigrants were American citizens between 1910 and 1930 (compared to 45 to 49 percent of European-born immigrants over the same period) they were largely left out of those government-created jobs (Balderrama & Rodriguez, 2006).

While curtailing access to assistance programs, local and federal authorities responded to Mexican poverty by promoting repatriation and deportation (Balderrama & Rodriguez, 2006). Gratton and Merchant (2013) explain that the dramatic rate of deportations of Mexicans between 1930 and 1933 was part of an “explicit Hoover administration policy announced in his State of the Union Address in 1930” (p. 955). Mexicans were the only immigrant group targeted in this way (Gratton & Merchant, 2013). The Social Security Act prevented “formal cooperation between welfare administrators and immigration officials” (Fox, 2016, p. 1059), but the practice continued, especially when officials from Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) found welfare workers who were willing to cooperate. Since national polls at the time demonstrated that most U.S. residents believed noncitizens should not receive relief and “those who did should be deported” (Fox, 2016, p. 1056), informal collaboration between INS officials and welfare workers was not rare.

There is some debate in the literature with regard to the level of voluntary departures by Mexicans during the Great Depression. While some scholars hold that significant numbers of Mexicans repatriated voluntarily (see Gratton & Merchant, 2013), others believe such migration was much more often coerced, resulting from systematic intimidation, harassment, and the lack of culturally appropriate practices by county welfare workers (see Balderrama & Rodriguez, 2006; Fox, 2013). Estimates of the number of people who repatriated and were deported range from 331,717 to over 1,000,000 (Gratton & Merchant, 2013). The California State Legislature, for example,

passed an apology resolution in 2005 for the “more than 1.2 million” Mexican immigrants who were forced to leave the United States during the Great Depression (“Apology Act for the 1930s Mexican Repatriation Program,” 2005). Most of the literature agrees, however, that upwards of 40% of those deported or repatriated were in fact U.S. citizens (Gratton & Merchant, 2013). Clearly, citizens’ rights were violated since U.S. citizens cannot be deported legally (Gratton & Merchant, 2013). One can only imagine how deportations affected family members who were too young, sick, old, or otherwise unable to care for themselves, including American-born citizens (Hanna, 1935). This is not too different from today’s unauthorized immigrant community, which is composed of mixed-status families where many members, especially the younger ones, are likely U.S. citizens.

In cases of repatriation, the U.S. federal government was involved to a much lesser extent than the cities, counties, and even private organizations that collected funds to pay for Mexican families’ trips to the southern border by train. There were various cases in which the Mexican government was also involved in the repatriation efforts (Hanna, 1935). There were, furthermore, coordination efforts with Mexican government officials and organizations (e.g., *Comite de Repatriacion*) and American-based Mexican benevolent aid societies (e.g., *Comisiones Honorificas Mexicanas* and the *Brigadas de la Cruz Azul*) (Gratton & Merchant, 2013).

Sometimes, voluntary repatriation efforts became coercive. In an attempt to promote self-repatriation, local governments and federal officials would collaborate in “street sweeps” and raids to round up Mexican immigrants who may or may not have been present in the country with proper documentation (Balderrama & Rodriguez, 2006). These efforts were meant to intimidate immigrants into leaving: “Raids assumed the logistics of full-scale paramilitary operations. Federal officials, county deputy sheriffs, and city police cooperated in local roundups in order to assure maximum success” (Balderrama & Rodriguez, 2006, p. 71).

Once immigrants were apprehended, their experience in custody varied. Gratton and Merchant (2013) give the sense that formal, neutral hearings were conducted to determine the removal of immigrants. Balderrama and Rodriguez (2006) paint a different picture: “Although some courts did employ Spanish-speaking interpreters, there were seldom any interpreters available during the initial critical questioning or pretrial period. In some instances, the judicial proceedings amounted to little more than a kangaroo-court trial” (p. 65). Mexican Americans who organized against these raids

were labeled as “communists or radicals” before being deported (Balderrama & Rodriguez, 2006).

I now take a closer look at Mexican communities in the Southwest, Los Angeles, and Detroit to gain a better understanding of the mechanisms by which public officials and social workers engaged in the oppressive Mexican repatriation of the Great Depression.

MEXICANS IN THE SOUTHWEST AND PATTERNED RELIEF

In 1930, at the beginning of the Great Depression, 87% of Mexican immigrants lived in the Southwest. Most lived and worked in rural settings (Fox, 2010). Fox’s (2010) study discovers a patterning of relief among Mexican immigrants, European immigrants, and African Americans that is different enough to conceptually differentiate as three different worlds. Cities with higher Mexican populations in the Southwest not only spent less in aid overall, they also spent “proportionately more private as opposed to public funds” (Fox 2010, p. 455). In 1929, for example, a 10% increase in Mexican population was associated with a \$0.16 decline in total per capita relief spending and a 7% decrease in relief from public sources (Fox, 2010). One of the main reasons behind the patterned relief is, of course, intolerance in the form of racism and xenophobia. However, Fox’s (2010) study reveals other mechanisms at play, namely the labor market structure and municipal reforms.

The agricultural economic structure in the Southwest depended on migrant wage-laborers who were unattached to any particular employer, unlike black share croppers in the South who received compensation in-kind and were immobile or factory-working European immigrants in the Midwest or Northeast (Fox, 2010). As such, “[a] gribusiness saw relief as necessary to maintain their labor supply nearby during the off agricultural season” (Fox, 2010, p. 468). This explains why public and private relief were considered to be subsidies for the agriculture industry. This also partly explains why American laborers widely perceived Mexicans as dependent on aid and why social workers were so pessimistic about their potential to assimilate (Fox, 2010). Another resulting trait from the Mexican migratory nature of the Southwestern labor market was that working conditions – mobile over large tracts of land – made it difficult for workers to organize and unionize, unlike their European counterparts in centralized factories.

Municipal reform was the second mechanism that determined aid in Southwestern cities and counties. Great Depression-era city

ordinances and county legislation in the Southwest sought to reform elections to diminish the role of political parties. In other parts of the country, such as New England, political party influence allowed for machine politics to emerge. With limited machine politics, Southwestern localities relied less on patronage for social and economic advancement and opted instead for relief spending (Fox, 2010).

As the economy worsened during the Great Depression, counties in the Southwest became less friendly to agribusiness subsidies and public relief. Mexican migrants became increasingly viewed as dependent on aid. Thus, counties took up voluntary repatriation efforts followed by deportation raids to address needy Mexican immigrants (Balderrama & Rodriguez, 2006).

MEXICANS IN LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

The example of Los Angeles demonstrates how various public actors, from social workers to elected officials and police officers, came together under specific economic conditions to create a hostile environment for Mexican immigrants. Los Angeles was one of the most prominent sites of repatriation, deportation, and intimidation against Mexican communities during the Great Depression. At first, welfare officials and private groups collected funds to move Mexicans south of the border. Once they realized some immigrants did not wish to leave, the process became more coercive (Hoffman, 1973; Gratton & Merchant, 2013; Balderrama & Rodriguez, 2006). Hoffman (1973) argues much of the impetus behind the repatriation campaign in Los Angeles started at the federal level when the Hoover administration explicitly stated their intention to remove unauthorized citizens.

President Hoover's appointment for Secretary of Labor, William Doak, reflected his ambition to address unemployment partly through alien repatriation. Secretary Doak announced that one way to address the unemployment troubles facing the nation was to oust as many of the "400,000 aliens who were illegal residents in the United States" as possible (Hoffman, 1973, p. 206). The U.S. Border Patrol, created in 1925, provided the new Labor Secretary the means to attempt it.

At the local level, the Los Angeles city and county governments formed citizens' relief committees in line with President Hoover's Emergency Committee for Employment (PECE). Charles Visel was appointed as the coordinator for the city committee and was eager to address the unemployment issue in Los Angeles. Visel contacted Colonel Woods, Hoover's national PECE coordinator, informing

him of the presence of the migrant communities and suggested that “the police and sheriff’s offices might lend assistance” to the local immigration office (Hoffman, 1973, p. 208). In a move similar to repatriation campaigns in other municipalities, Visel sought to “establish an environment hostile enough to alarm aliens” rather than forcibly deport all of them in order to make more jobs available to natives (Hoffman, 1973 p. 208). Colonel Woods eagerly replied to Visel’s inquiry and advised him to send more details directly to Labor Secretary Doak.

Coordinator Visel devised a plan in which a major publicity campaign would announce the impending immigration raids, raising alarm in the immigrant communities, followed by some symbolic public arrests (Hoffman, 1973). Several raids and arrests took place, almost exclusively in Mexican immigrant communities. One such raid took place in El Monte, where over 300 people were questioned and thirteen arrested (Hoffman, 1973). It was out of these campaigns that the Mexican Chamber of Commerce of Los Angeles was born to counter the immigration raids’ detrimental effects on the social and economic lives of immigrants. Another major raid took place at La Placita, where 400 people were detained and only a handful arrested, including Mexican, Chinese, and Japanese immigrants (Hoffman, 1973; Balderrama & Rodriguez, 2006). Balderrama and Rodriguez’s (2006) argument about illegal immigration detention is substantiated by Hoffman (1973), who points out that aliens were detained “without benefit of counsel and telegraphing for a warrant of arrest after a provable case was found” (p. 216).

These highly visible and oppressive detainments took place at the same time that the Los Angeles County Bureau of Welfare funded “a series of repatriation trains to transport indigent Mexican families as far as Mexico City [starting in 1931]. By the end of that year, four shipments had taken over 2,300 people, including American-born children, out of the country” (Hoffman, 1973, p. 218). Hoffman (1973) concludes that the anti-alien campaigns failed to solve the unemployment issue and created new tensions among various communities in Los Angeles.

MEXICANS IN MICHIGAN

Michigan state and county officials also employed repatriation and deportation tactics to address poverty in Mexican communities. The practice became so common that the Michigan State Welfare Department released a pamphlet that explained the issue: “In technical

language repatriation refers to the alien who by reason of his age or physical condition is unable to become rehabilitated in the economic situation today” (Humphrey, 1941, p. 497). Humphrey (1941) reminds us that Mexican laborers were not migratory everywhere: “in Detroit, [they] became industrial worker[s]” (p. 498). Many Mexican industrial workers repatriated voluntarily due to the economic hardship experienced during the Great Depression, while others were forced to leave (Humphrey, 1941). The Detroit Mexican *colonia* was established in 1918 when Mexicans, replacing workmen who left for World War I, arrived to work in the “motor-car factories” (Humphrey, 1941, p. 500).

Humphrey (1941) describes the repatriation campaign in Detroit as one that involved cooperation between the Detroit Department of Public Welfare and the Mexican government, in which the former paid for train fares to the border and the latter would take care of families thereafter. Diego Rivera, famous Mexican artist and husband of Frida Kahlo, advised fellow Mexicans to return home in 1932 as he painted his mural in the Detroit Art Institute.

Whenever a Mexican family applied for aid, they were first sent to the “Mexican Bureau” in the Detroit Department of Public Welfare where conversations around repatriation occurred (Humphrey, 1941). According to Humphrey (1941), at first Mexican migrants were eager to return to Mexico because of promises of land and tools, only to find these were lies. As word of the false promises made their way back to Detroit (along with the repatriated migrants), fewer Mexicans were willing to repatriate voluntarily (Humphrey, 1941).

The rights of naturalized citizens and U.S.-born sons and daughters of migrants were often ignored by case workers in discussing repatriation with Mexican families (Humphrey, 1941). Some case workers were more paternalistic than others and, “despite frequent protestations by families that repatriation was not desired... [t]he worker might continually question the family about a return” (Humphrey, 1941, p. 507). Humphrey (1941) argues that, even among case workers, stereotypes of Mexicans as lazy and dependent on aid were rampant. He concludes that the Detroit repatriation program was successful as a money-saving endeavor but a failure as a case work method.

CONCLUSION

It is unclear to what degree the various historical actors in these three case studies considered their actions to be part of a wider policy of exclusion and oppression. It’s also difficult to assess how coercive or paternalistic their actions were; the voices of Mexicans and Mexican

Americans are rarely included in case notes or in the decision-making process of local and federal officials. The social workers in the case studies worked in relief departments, but their actions beg the question: relief for whom? Certainly, local welfare agents were willing to push out these foreigners in order to save relief money for the more deserving native poor.

While the Great Depression took place 90 years ago, the most recent economic recession reminds us how easily our fears can dictate policy decisions and elections. More troubling, however, is the quotidian actions of these historical actors. I imagine most acted out of a sense of duty and responsibility to their country or government: they truly believed Mexican immigrants wanted to—or should—go back to Mexico, or that everyone would be better off if people were redistributed across geography. The combination of economic anxiety and a fundamental lack of self-reflection created an oppressive bureaucracy. I hope that our profession has evolved enough to avoid these pitfalls in working so closely with vulnerable immigrant populations. This time, we need to write a different story.

REFERENCES

- Apology Act for the 1930s Mexican Repatriation Program, S.B. 670, California State Senate § 8720-8723 (2005).
- Balderrama, F. E. & Rodriguez, R. (2006). *Decade of betrayal: Mexican repatriation in the 1930s*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.
- Chishti, M., Pierce, S., & Bolter, J. (2017). The Obama record on deportations: Deporter in chief or not? Migration Policy Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/obama-record-deportations-deporter-chief-or-not>
- Fox, C. (2010). Three worlds of relief: Race, immigration, and public and private social welfare spending in American cities, 1929. *American Journal of Sociology*, 116(2), 453- 502.
- Fox, C. (2016). Unauthorized welfare: The origins of immigrant status restrictions in American social policy. *Journal of American History*, 102(4), 1051-1074. doi:10.1093/jahist/jav758
- Gratton, B. & Merchant, E. (2013). Immigration, repatriation, and deportation: The Mexican-origin population in the United States, 1920-1950. *International Migration Review*, 47(4), 944-975.
- Hanna, A. K. (1935). Social services on the Mexican border. *Official Proceedings of National Conference of Social Welfare*, 692-699.
- Hoffman, A. (1973). The 1931 federal deportation drive and the Los Angeles Mexicancommunity. *Pacific Historical Review*, 42(2), 205-219.

- Humphrey, N. (1941). Mexican repatriation from Michigan public assistance in historical perspective. *Social Service Review*, 15(3), 497-513.
- Massey, D. (2006). Borderline madness. *The Chronicle Review*, 52.
- Morgaine, K., & Capous-Desyllas, M. (2015). *Anti-Oppressive Social Work Practice*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publishing.
- Patterson, J. T. (2000). *America's struggle against poverty in the twentieth century* (2nd ed.). Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.
- Shear, M., & Nixon, R. (2017). New Trump deportation rules allow far more expulsions. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/21/us/politics/dhs-immigration-trump.html?_r=0

TADEO WEINER DAVIS is a first-year student in the A.M./Ph.D. program at the School of Social Service Administration. Prior to coming to SSA, he worked with allies to pass juvenile justice reform legislation in Kansas. Tadeo's research interests deal with advocacy, political identity of marginalized individuals, and governance in urban centers. Originally from La Paz, Bolivia, Tadeo strongly identifies as an immigrant-American. Tadeo holds a B.A. in sociology from Stanford University.