



The NiLP Report

on Latino Politics & Policy



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Guest Commentary

Bronx Leaders Meet to Develop Citywide Progressive Latino Policy Agenda for NYC

By Huáscar Robles (December 7, 2015)

The Campaign for Fair Latino Representation held its local forum of Bronx activists, launching its process of developing a citywide progressive Latino policy agenda. This is the first of a series of local forums the Campaign is sponsoring throughout Latino communities in the five boroughs of New York City. It is part of an agenda-building process that will culminate in a historic citywide Latino summit early this coming year.



On Saturday, December 5th, members of the Bronx community came together to push for a progressive policy agenda that gives Latinos - ALL Latinos - access to affordable housing, healthcare, employment, education and overall safety. Among the sponsors and workshop presenters are well-known community activists and leaders, including Ramón Jiménez, Wanda Salaman, Ismael Betancourt, Julio Pabón, Rev. Carmen Hernández, Frank García, Julio Muñoz and others. The forum was organized under the leadership of Andres Torres, one of the Coordinators of the Campaign for Fair Latino Representation, and civil rights attorney Ramon Jimenez.



The Bronx is indeed growing, but Latinos should grow along with it. After all, Latinos make up more than half its population (54.8%) and is the only borough where they are the majority. According to the New York State Comptroller, between 1980 and 2012, the Bronx saw its population increase by 240,000. An article by The American Prospect elucidates on this unprecedented

growth, pointing out that property purchases in the borough increased 39% from 2013 to 2014 to \$2.4 billion. Also, building permits rose 48% in the first quarter of 2015 and affordable housing has increased significantly.

However, as the Borough grows, many of its social and economic problems persist. The Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness found that 30.2% of Bronx residents lived below the poverty level as of 2012. This amounts to a family of three surviving on less than \$18,310 each year. Additionally, "Nearly one in seven (13.4%) experience severe poverty (earning less than 50% of the federal poverty level), both of which are twice the state and national rates," the report adds. The South Bronx alone - the nation's 16th congressional district - is, in fact, the nation's poorest district, with poverty rates reaching 36.9%."

Below are the issues that the Bronx grapples with as it transforms itself over decades.

These are five social and economic aspects Latinos and all Bronx residents face daily. The discussion on each area was led by the following:

- **Housing/Gentrification:** Wanda Salamán and Daniel Silvagnoli
- **Education:** Luis Quirós, Guisela Marroquín and others
- **Health/Environmental Justice:** Julio Pabón and others
- **Policing & Community:** Ramón Jiménez, and Jasmir Trujillo
- **Economic Development/Economic Justice:** Julio Muñoz, Rev. Carmen Hernández, Frank García and Eliot Quiñones

Housing. Housing is a major concern for Bronxites who fear rent hikes might force them out of their neighborhoods. A report by the Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness pointed out that in 2014 the Bronx lead other boroughs in homelessness, with more than one thousand families living in shelters due to increasing rents.

Analysts state gentrification might be the force behind the disproportionate rent increases. Gentrification occurs when groups or individuals renovate areas or neighborhoods, often resulting in displacement of low-income families or local businesses. The South Bronx has long been a target for such housing development. In October, developers Somerset Partners and the Chetrit Group erected a billboard renaming Port Morris "The Piano District." The billboard promised luxury waterfront properties, world class dining, art and architecture. As the activist blog Welcome2theBronx.com pointed out, these developers already plan to build six 25-story residential, market rate towers in an area where "the majority are living well below the poverty line and are fighting for their very lives as they suffer health disparities disproportionately more than others across the city."



Opponents are viewing Mayor Bill de Blasio's affordable housing plan as a backdoor to gentrification. His affordable housing plan is complex, but basically consists of rezoning that increases the residential density of the region, with developers required to set a percentage aside for affordable units. Critics argue that units won't be affordable for Bronx residents. For example, in buildings with 25% set aside for affordable units, families must earn at least \$46,620. By contrast, the Bronx median family income is \$34,388. As a result, de Blasio's plan was rejected by all 12 Bronx community boards.

Health and Environment. Asthma, obesity, diabetes and, more recently, legionnaires disease are just a few of the health threats to the Bronx directly tied to the borough's low socio-economic status. Asthma problems, for example, has given the South Bronx the moniker of "Asthma Alley". Asthma death rates are approximately three times higher than the national average, according to the South Bronx Environmental Health and Policy Study.

Another study by the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation ranked the Bronx as the unhealthiest county in New York State. The study, according to the New York Daily News, found the Bronx fared worse than the other boroughs with many health problems. The Bronx is the worst in:

- particulate-matter pollution, which causes asthma episodes. (Note: activists have rallied against FreshDirect's 500,000 square-foot warehouse in the South Bronx because of emissions their vehicles would release in the air.)
- teen birth rates by 55%
- Bronx children in single-parent families by 23% and
- chlamydia infections



"The Bronx ranked worst in the state for socioeconomic factors that affect health, such as unemployment, poverty, street crime and low education," the Daily News piece reported.

Back in July of 2015, a legionnaires outbreak in the Bronx affected over 100 people, hospitalized dozens and killed 12. The International Business Times reported it was the "largest outbreak" in the history of New York State. The disease was traced to cooling towers found in large buildings, but its proliferation was due to the poor structural conditions associated with low-income neighborhoods. As the IBT reported:

"Aggravating the situation are questions of funding and resources, both public and private, which vary significantly by New York City neighborhood. In 2012, the South Bronx was named the poorest congressional district in the country, with nearly a third of residents living below the federal poverty line. Reports of underfunded schools, affordable housing programs, parks and even an animal shelter in the Bronx are frequent."

Policing. Another concern for Bronx residents is the NYPD's surveillance policy. A legacy of "broken windows" policy has prompted the NYPD's abusive and invasive policing that affects blacks and Latinos disproportionately.

Stop and frisk - the policy that allowed officers to detain and question persons suspected of committing a crime - is an example. A report by the Public Advocate published by the Washington Post stated that of those stopped, most were Hispanic or African American: 53% were African American, 31% were Hispanic, 10% were white and 6% were of other ethnicity. The Post also reported that the concentration of stops per precinct was highest in parts of the Bronx along with East New York, Starret City, Brownsville and Ocean Hill in Brooklyn and added that "By contrast, the areas with the least stops tend to be ones with lots of white people: Midtown, Little Italy, Chelsea and Central Park in Manhattan, and Greenpoint in Brooklyn."

Overall, there has been discontent with police practices citywide, statewide and nationwide. Events such as Freddie Gray's death in Baltimore, Maryland and Eric Garner's death in Staten Island, New York, have brought national attention to a policing problem that affects mostly minorities.

Education. Latinos make up 61% of the Bronx's public schools, a system that fails to provide a strong education for children. The New York Daily News has reported that the South Bronx provided the worst education in the entire city.

A few findings:

- 93% of the students in the South Bronx struggle economically, with one out of 10 being homeless
- Average attendance is one of the worst in the city
- Reading proficiency is only 10 percent for elementary and middle school students
- Math proficiency is only 13% for the same group
- Only 54% of the students who reached high school graduate on time in four years

City officials are trying to turn things around; meanwhile the options for parents are discouraging.

Economic Development. In general, the Bronx has added jobs over the years. The problem is those jobs do not pay enough. The American Prospect has pointed out that population growth stimulated job growth, "The Bronx has been adding jobs, their number increasing by 9,000 in the decade between 1982 and 1992, by 20,000 between 1992 and 2002, and by 24,000 between 2002 and 2012." In addition, in 2013, one or more persons in the Bronx earned a salary in only 74% of the families, five points below the national average. In addition, Bronxites in general don't earn a lot: "35% of Bronx workers are employed in low-end service sector jobs, compared to the citywide average of 24%," the American Prospect reported. The Bronx's unemployment rate is around 8.3%.

The 2013 New York State Comptroller's annual report noted jobs in the Bronx's private sector rose to 7.7% between 2007 and 2012. In 2012, almost half of private sector jobs were found in the areas of health care, social services and education services. In 2012, the Norwood News reported that manufacturing jobs vanished from the Bronx after the Stella D'Oro cookie factory, Old London Foods and Melba toast closed shop. It found that Bronx Borough President Rubén Díaz, Jr. and the Bronx Overall Economic Development Corporation have tried to attract new venues, among them, FreshDirect, which now operates in the South Bronx to the chagrin of environmentalists.

Note: For further information about participating in this agenda-building process in the Bronx and other boroughs, visit the [website of the Campaign for Fair Latino Representation](#).

***Huáscar Robles** is a journalist and documentary filmmaker. His articles and visual work have been published in The New York Times, Chicago Tribune's *Hoy and Change.org*, among others. He's the author of the book *Puertos principios: temblemos todos*, a report and analysis of Haiti after the earthquake. He's a former Ochberg Fellow of Columbia University's Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma and a former fellow at the Institute for Justice and Journalism. He can be reached at huascar.robles@gmail.com.*

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