The Persistence of Immigrant Labor in California's Hospitality Industry

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Introduction

Since California's inception, its stance on immigration has been akin to the face of Janus, welcoming when needing abundant sources of cheap labor and antagonistic when searching for scapegoats for failing economies. These effects are amplified in the hospitality industry, which is particularly prone to economic fluctuations and heavily sustained by immigrant labor[1]. Despite California's turbulent position on immigrant policies, the immigrant and migrant day laborer populations continually persist through community-building, redefining the implied short-term nature of the term "migrant" and developing into core pillars of California's hospitality industry.

A Historical View: California's Turbulent Relationship with Immigration

California's paradoxical reliance yet hesitance toward immigrant labor has been evident since the Gold Rush and the founding of the state in 1850. As 300,000 people flooded into Northern California[2] from as far as China, Chile, and France hoping to strike gold and a new fortune, California's cities quickly swelled[3]. For example, San Francisco exploded from 500 in 1847 to more than 150,000 in 1852. As cities grew and the economy kickstarted, there was a growing need for California's hospitality industry, where restaurants and inns rose in "boomtowns" to accommodate and profit off of the mass immigration[4]. Many miners took meals and boarded at hotels, restaurants, and boarding houses, which were often staffed by Chinese immigrants to work in the kitchens, wash and iron laundry, and grow food. By 1880, immigrants and their children consisted of one-third of all California workers, and immigrant prominence further rose to 40 percent in 1920, marking California as a hub of immigration[5]. But as the rush

[1]Rasic, "Immigration and the Hospitality Industry."
[2]"California Gold Rush."
[3]"Historical Impact of the California Gold Rush | Norwich University - Online."
[4]"Forgotten Footsteps."
[5]Hirschman and Mogford, "Immigration and the American Industrial Revolution From 1880 to 1920."

of gold died down, as did the state's capacity for immigrants, akin to the booming towns that quickly became deserted ghost towns. Despite these growths and the heavy reliance on immigrant labor, immigrants were often victims of racism and mistreatment as well as scapegoats for downtrending economies and employment. For example, the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act placed a 10-year ban on Chinese laborers immigrating to the United States due to rising economic anxieties from white workers, who blamed Chinese immigrants for lower wages and competition for jobs[6]. Chinese communities responded to the forced segregation and mounting fear by forming tighter communities and establishing Chinatowns, demonstrating the importance of immigrant communities; as merchants were exempt from the Exclusion Act, many immigrants opened restaurants to circumvent the legal barriers, further contributing to the establishment of the hospitality industry[7]. Other discriminatory policies include the Alien Land Law of 1913, which denied East Asian (Korean, Japanese, Chinese) immigrants the right to own land, making it impossible for Asian immigrants to farm land for income,[8] further turning them toward the hospitality industry. In World War I, the government passed the Immigration Act of 1924, restricting further immigration in a time of strife, setting quotas for immigration and fully excluding all immigrants from Asia[9]. As immigrants were further pushed to the side, scapegoated, and restricted, they continued to build communities to protect themselves: Chinatown, Koreatown, Little Tokyo, and Little Saigon amongst others. Ultimately, many of these unconstitutional acts were repealed, but hostility and racism persisted.

The discrimination early Asian immigrants faced were not unique. Similarly, the 1942-1946 Bracero Program, an agreement between Mexico and the United States, brought

[6]Natl. Arch., "Chinese Exclusion Act (1882)."
[7]NBC News, "How 1800s Racism Birthed Chinatown, Japantown and Other Ethnic Enclaves."
[8]Gelbart, "California's Alien Land Laws."
[9]"Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations - Office of the Historian."

over four million short-term contract workers or *braceros* to the United States to address a national agricultural labor shortage due to World War II. Due to California's large agricultural demand, many *braceros* settled in the Central Valley. But despite putting out the call for cheap labor and reverting previous deportations on Mexican immigrants, California and other states continued discriminating against the foreign workers through implementing surcharges for room and board, deducting pay, and exposing them to dangerous working conditions[10].

As California urbanized, the need for cheap farm labor subsided, and competition for skilled labor increased. Immigration policies were further constrained in the 1990s as the public feared for a lack of jobs,[11] and California's 1994 Proposition 187 highlighted yet another instance where undocumented immigrants were denied public services such as education and healthcare. It appeared in a time where California was in an economic recession, and undocumented immigrants once again became scapegoats once more for the poor economy[12].

Persisting Against Discrimination: Community Building

Despite mounting hurdles, immigrants persisted, built, and expanded their communities. Consistently, California has had a higher percentage of total population of immigrants than the national average (Figure 1). Today, it is home to 10.9 million immigrants, accounting for 22% of the population across the nation, with 49% being born in Latin America and 41% being born in Asia.

[10]Thurber, "Research Guides."
[11]Vankin, "California's History of Immigration."
[12]Thurber, "Research Guides."

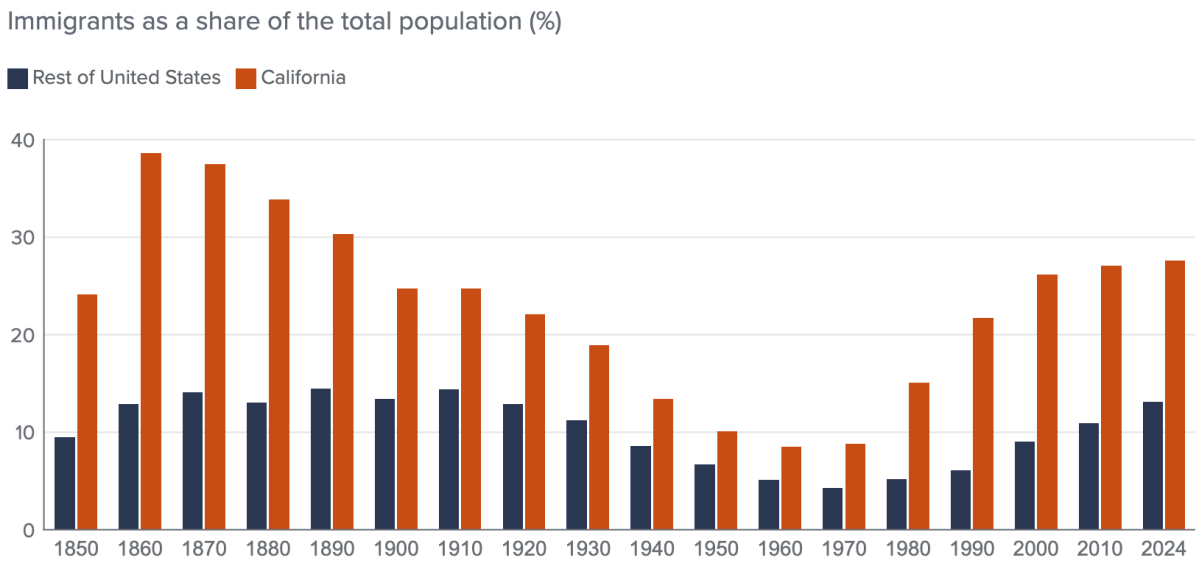


Figure 1. Foreign-born share of the population, California and the United States, [years shown]. Source: Public Policy Institute of California, "Immigrants in California."

This continual persistence of immigrants can be attributed to the establishment of immigrant communities and organizations with the mission of supporting other immigrants. For example, the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON) was first founded in July 2001 in Northridge California from a coalition of 12 community-based organizations and work centers, with the goal of protecting day laborers and migrant workers rights and improving their livelihoods despite the United States' and California's policies against immigration. Due to the massive demand for NDLON, it has since expanded across the United States. Many immigrants struggling financially turn to day labor, where they work various jobs by day, such as moving furniture, housecleaning, or handyman work, key tasks of the hospitality industry. Before the advent of NDLON, day laborers often organized at street corners, parking lots, and storefronts to find work[13]. Now, day laborers congregate at job centers, where they have a designated organization connecting laborers to employers. In addition to providing work, these centers

[13]Gonzalez, *Day Labor in the Golden State*.

quickly became hubs of community-building and fostered a sense of belonging. One such job center is the Pasadena Job Center, which in addition to connecting day laborers to employers, hosts educational classes teaching workers' rights and English speaking skills. Noted from personal volunteering experiences, it also hosts rallies and events, such as community gatherings and protests on immigrant centered rights[14].

As immigrants regained a foothold in the community, they were steadily able to work in more jobs, including the hospitality sector. In 2014, immigrants made up 25.2 percent of all employees in California's accommodation and foods industry, which includes hotel cleaners and restaurant workers[15]. Over time, immigrants were able to regain their positions in society through establishing communities and organizations protecting their rights[16]. However, this equilibrium would soon be disrupted yet again, as the immigrant community faces disruption from ICE.

Modern Day: ICE Raids and Attempted Uprooting of the California Immigrant Community

As economic growth slows and national security rises, the same historical story reemerges, and the country once again attempts massive deportation of immigrants through the United States' Immigrant and Customs Enforcement (ICE). In 2025, President Donald Trump prioritized the deportation of undocumented individuals to combat crime, keep the economy from overcrowding, and to keep public benefits for citizens only. Under this assumption, the White House deployed 2,000 national guards in June, justifying this militarization as a way to protect America from the invasion of "illegal criminals,"[17] as many immigrants were violently

[14]"Our History."
[15]"Nae-ca-Report.Pdf."
[16] Public Policy Inst. Calif., "Immigrants in California."
[17]House, "Statement from the White House."

arrested and placed on trial. As of the writing of this paper, raids are still ongoing. Many of these raids are workplace raids, where potential illegal immigrants would be arrested while working. Further, ICE uses race as an account for arrests, making Latinos especially susceptible to being raided. These raids can take place at any time and anywhere, and being arrested can put a financially struggling family further in danger. Because of this, many Latino people cannot leave their homes to work or run errands for fear of being arrested by ICE. This not only negatively impacts Latino employees working in the hospitality industry, but as immigrants are unable to shop, many businesses that rely on immigrant customer bases are also suffering. One business in Santa Ana reports that it experiences 80 percent less foot traffic[18].

In an interview with Jose Madera, the director of the Pasadena Job Center, Madera describes how the ICE raids are eliciting fear and stability, the negative effects of which ripple outward from the immigrant community to the general public, impacting both emotional and the economy. Madera describes life as an immigrant as, “They always have to wake up and decide, ‘Do I go to work and pay rent and support my family, or stay home and see if I’m gonna get kicked out of my home and not be able to feed my family’ because of the fear of being kidnapped as they go to work. So that’s a big strain economically, also emotionally, to many families.[19]” The American Immigration Council also describes a drop in the growth of the hospitality industry from 1.5% in June 2024 to 0.2% in June 2025,[20] as the immigrants that fueled many vital industries in California are now in hiding. Another survey by the American Hotel and Lodging Association and Hierology reports that 65% of hotels experience staff shortages from the ICE raids[21]. California’s lieutenant governor, Eleni Kounalakis, also states

[18]“OC Businesses Lose $59M Following Immigration Enforcement | School of Social Ecology.”
[19]Jose Madera, “Pasadena Job Center Interview,” October 11, 2025, Kenneth Lee.
[20]“Trump’s Immigration Actions Are Taking a Toll on Local Economies – Here’s What the Data Says So Far.”
[21]EMARKETER, “US Immigration Crackdown Sparks Labor, Sales Concerns in Hospitality and Retail.”

that undocumented workers consist of almost 8% of all workers in California[22]. These ICE raids pose a risk not only to undocumented immigrants, but also business owners and the economy.

Fighting for Rights: The Community as a Central Line of Defense

Rather than staying silent like in the past and imposing self-segregation, immigrant communities today are now empowered to vocalize their concerns. In other terms, whereas individuals are easily targeted, being part of a larger community united against a similar cause lends protection. For example, the NDLON is working to protect day laborers and support immigrants who are being deported by ICE. From the interview with Madera, the NDLON is working to teach immigrants how to exercise their constitutional rights, so that when facing ICE agents, they can protect themselves to the fullest. The NDLON has organized marches and protests against the ICE raids, gathering in places where immigrants were abducted, and holding concerts with their band, Radio Jornalera. Through this intertwined community, the NDLON is able to make big changes and support immigrants. Further, the NDLON hosts fundraisers to support the legal battle for day laborers arrested by ICE, supporting every individual they can. It also works to "adopt corners," or to protect spots that may potentially be raided by ICE, such as Home Depots, car washes, or street corners. Around the country, the NDLON has around 100 corners adopted, protecting day laborers.

The NDLON has been recognized for its impacts in the community and in California as a whole, being chosen as nonprofit of the year by California state senator Judy Chu in 2025[23]. This government endorsement similarly reflects California's change in trajectory. Whereas it

[22]"New Report: Lt. Governor Kounalakis Highlights Immigrants' Vital Role in California's Economy - Lieutenant Governor."
[23]"Rep. Chu Honors Local Leaders at 2025 Congressional Leadership of the Year Awards Ceremony | Representative Judy Chu."

similarly exhibited cycles of use and disuse for immigrants in the past, as a whole, due to its large immigrant community, it sees immigrants as part of its own. Everything that the NDLON has accomplished is caused by the immigrant community and for the immigrant community. Overall, the day laborer and immigrant community has prospered to become what it is today, and will continue in the future to grow and make even larger impacts on our society.

Looking Forward

In addition to NDLON and Latino communities, all immigrant communities are banding together in this unprecedented battle against ICE[24]. In the past, lots of legislation passed targeted a specific ethnic group, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act or the Alien Land Laws. However, this time, the ICE raids target all immigrants, not just a specific ethnicity. Further since the hospitality industry is all encompassing and deeply intertwined with the rest of the economy, these impacts have a rippling effect outward for the entire United States. These cycles of use and discard for immigrants are beginning to be pushed back against the rise of immigrant communities. Because of the immigrant community, California is facing a change in its views of immigrants, and organizations such as the NDLON are receiving recognition for their efforts from government officials. This empowerment of immigrant communities foretells not only a change in the views of immigrants not only in California, but the rest of the United States as well.

[24]*Immigration Raids - Immigrant Defense Project.*

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