

America at the Tipping Point: The Changing Face of a Nation

## In nation's breadbasket, Latinos stuck in poverty

By GOSIA WOZNIACKA | Associated Press  
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(AP/Gosia Wozniacka)

FRESNO, Calif. (AP) — On a warm spring day, farmworker Cristina Melendez was bedridden and unable to make her way back into the asparagus fields of central California for the kind of backbreaking work she's done since childhood.

The 36-year-old mother of seven was desperate. Her bank account had been at zero for months, the refrigerator was nearly empty, and she didn't have enough to cover the rent. Lacking health insurance, Melendez couldn't see a doctor or afford medication, so her illness dragged on — and another day came and went without work or pay.

A native of Mexico who was smuggled into the United States as a child, Melendez had once dreamed big: to be a bilingual secretary, to own a house and a car, to become a U.S. citizen. Agriculture, she hoped, would be the springboard to a better life — for her and her U.S.-born children, the next generation of a family whose past and future are deeply rooted in the fertile earth of America's breadbasket.

California's San Joaquin Valley is one of the richest agricultural regions in the world, with Fresno County farmers receiving a record \$6.8 billion in revenues last year. But the region also consistently ranks among the nation's most impoverished. Sometimes called "Appalachia of the West," it's where families,

especially Hispanic immigrants and their children, live year after year in destitution.

This divide causes concern because of what it may foretell as the nation's Hispanic population explodes and the U.S. moves toward becoming a majority minority nation. Census data show that non-Hispanic whites will cease to be a majority somewhere about the year 2043. The shift is largely driven by high birth rates among Hispanics as well as by declines in the aging white population.

Already there are a record number of Hispanics living below the poverty line nationwide, and the number of Hispanic children in poverty exceeds that of any other racial or ethnic group. Largely less educated, Hispanic workers are concentrated in relatively low-skill occupations, earning less than the average for all U.S. workers.

"America's communities have become divided between economic winners and losers," said Daniel Lichter, a Cornell University sociologist and past president of the Population Association of America. "Increasingly, Hispanics begin life's race at a decided disadvantage, raising the specter of new Hispanic ghettos and increasing isolation."

As poor working Latinos settle across the country, fueling local economies in industries such as manufacturing, construction and agriculture, some are left with little room to climb the job ladder.

That holding pattern leads to a cycle of poverty that shows up in the next generation of U.S. citizens. With poverty stunting childhood development and stymieing educational attainment, experts say many Latino children are on track to remain stuck in low-skilled, underpaid jobs.

Harvard economist George Borjas projects that the children of today's immigrants will earn on average 10 percent to 15 percent less than nonimmigrant Americans, with Latinos in particular struggling. The trend could have broad repercussions.

"Much of the nation's labor force growth, its future growth, will come from the Hispanic community," said Mark Hugo Lopez, associate director of the Pew Hispanic Center, pointing to research showing that childhood poverty affects education and jobs. "This not only has implications for Latino families, but for the nation as a whole."

The cycle is especially evident in the fields, vineyards, orchards and groves of the San Joaquin Valley, which stretches about 250 miles between the San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles. Thousand-acre farms dominate, thriving on a system of dammed rivers, drained lakes, advanced fertilizers and pesticides. Despite agriculture's modernization and its steadily growing revenues, surprisingly little has changed for the workers themselves.

Farmers have always relied on hiring racial or ethnic minorities ranked at the bottom of society. Valley crops once were harvested by Chinese, Japanese,

Punjabis, Filipinos, Mexican braceros, southern Europeans, African-Americans and the white American Dust Bowl arrivals that were an exception to the immigrant mold. Today's crops are picked primarily by Hispanic immigrants like Melendez or their American-born children.

Hispanics account for half the population in Fresno County, and one-third of them live in poverty. Nationally, 1 in 4 Latinos lives below the poverty line, the second-highest percentage of all ethnic and racial groups, after blacks. That compares with an overall national rate of 15 percent and a rate for whites of about 10 percent.

Nowhere are these differences more apparent than in Fresno, California's fifth-largest city and the state's unofficial agricultural capital.

Fresno's north side — home to bankers, doctors and teachers — is dotted with gated communities and McMansions with manicured lawns. It boasts newly paved streets, bike lanes, generous sidewalks, a popular mall and parks.

Melendez's neighborhood in southeast Fresno is a world away. Children on bikes crisscross cracked streets, their gutters strewn with trash. Shabby apartment complexes stretch for blocks. Melendez's three-bedroom home sits on the bottom floor of one such complex, shared by Latino immigrants and Hmong refugees.

Melendez's journey here began with her father, who crossed the U.S.-Mexico border illegally in the late 1970s to pick oranges. He returned to Mexico within a year, but Melendez's mother, Maria Rosales, then came to pick grapes, almonds and peaches.

"People told me I would be sweeping dollars with a broom in California, but what I swept were only pennies," said Rosales, 60, who is now a U.S. citizen and still lives in Fresno.

At 13, Melendez, along with two of her sisters, joined her mother in California, having trekked with a smuggler across the border. The family settled in a small farmworker town in Fresno County. After school and on weekends, Melendez and her sisters picked the grapes that surrounded them.

"It was loneliness. It was sadness," Melendez said. "I hated grapes."

Melendez dropped out of high school to get married and to get away from working the vineyards, but she and her husband soon separated. Though she spoke good English, she still lived in the country illegally and lacked a high school diploma, barring most employment. She again turned to the fields.

When Melendez can work, she picks every type of crop, from asparagus and grapes to chili peppers. In the offseason, she ties vines and trims branches.

Paid by the hour, Melendez generally receives California's minimum wage of \$8. But whenever possible she works "piece rate," getting paid a set amount per box or bucket picked. Running through the fields to pick as much as she can, she once

grossed about \$3,000 for a few weeks of work.

But lean months with no work inevitably follow such windfalls. Without legal status, Melendez can't file for unemployment. She obtains food stamps for her U.S.-citizen children, but otherwise receives little government help. To make ends meet, she sometimes peddles barbecued beef, tamales and beauty products door to door and rents a room to a friend.

"That's what I have, and that's what I make do with," she said, "because the process of doing something else is difficult."

Her children know this, too. Her eldest sons, age 18 and 21, have high school diplomas – but no jobs. The oldest, Cristian, started attending Fresno City College's automotive technician program with the help of a loan but then dropped out. Last winter, with help from a local employment program, he got a two-month job at a bakery. He's also filled temporary positions in maintenance and at a vacuum cleaner company.

Now a parent himself, with a 3-year-old son to support, Cristian said he's desperate to find something permanent. He worked as a farmworker in high school and last year picked peaches, nectarines and grapes. He eventually hopes to get a business degree and open a tattoo parlor and smoke shop, but still fears following in his mother's footsteps — never finding a way out of the fields.

"I don't want to work in the fields, busting my ass for low pay. That doesn't make sense," he said. "But if I don't find work soon, we're low on income, so I'm going to have to go to the fields."

In Fresno, advocates and experts for years have noticed the inextricable relationship between agriculture, the Hispanic community and poverty, and sounded the alarm. But little has been done to tackle the root of the problem.

"The number of working people in poverty is increasing, and we're falling further behind in education and health. We need to reverse that trend. Otherwise we'll continue to be seen as a poor area with bad statistics," said Caroline Farrell, executive director of the Valley-based Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment. "And it will get worse. ... We won't have a sustainable community."

Fresno's mayor, Ashley Swearengin, hopes to reverse the trend and last year led a citywide program called Learn2Earn, which helps residents earn their high school diplomas and encourages them to pursue higher education and job training.

"We're talking about changing the mindset of people who think this is their lot in life, this is all they are ever going to do," said Linda Gleason, who leads Learn2Earn. "It's about tapping into people's internal motivation — and showing them education and a better job are not impossible dreams."

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Associated Press writer Hope Yen in Washington contributed to this report.

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EDITOR'S NOTE \_ "America at the Tipping Point: The Changing Face of a Nation" is an occasional series examining the cultural mosaic of the U.S. and its historic shift to a majority-minority nation.