The United States is “a country I never planned nor aspired to live in,” said Carmen Guerrero. Her business in Mexico City was growing fast. “I would say to myself, ‘I don’t need the North,’” unlike other Mexicans who were leaving for the United States in record numbers in the 1990s, after the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) undercut their livelihoods. Instead, Carmen would flee another major, if underappreciated, driver of Mexican migration: violence.  

Born in Mexico City, the third of six daughters of indigenous parents, as a toddler Carmen moved with her mother and sister to their father’s hometown in the countryside. Their mother farmed to feed the family—corn, many kinds of beans, grains, peppers, squash, chickens, cows, sheep. Their father stayed in the city to work as a carpenter, visiting on the weekends. “The entire community used one” primary school, so “when we were ready” for middle school, they returned to the city.  

“When we arrived in the city, we started doing many types of jobs,” since their father’s wages were insufficient to support the family. Their mother worked as a housekeeper, bringing home other families’ clothes to wash and iron as well as piecework for manufacturers. The girls sowed buttons onto shirts and leather onto baseballs. “Every vacation or every weekend, we went to different places to plant seeds, to work on farms, to babysit, to clean houses” in middle-class neighborhoods of the metropolis.
Carmen struggled in primary school. But “when I started middle school . . .
optometrists came to the school,” and “discovered that I needed glasses, and
after that I was a really smart girl,” she said, laughing. “I was very energetic.”
She excelled in chemistry and public speaking in high school, at the same time
teaching adult literacy classes and working in a clothing store.4

“After high school, I enrolled in the university,” studying political science.
“But in those years,” Carmen said, “it was very hard” for Mexicans to attend
high school or college. Teacher strikes and youth gangs paid by political par-
ties to attack educational institutions disrupted their learning. Sometimes pro-
fessors held classes in the street. But ultimately, “I was enrolled just two years.”
Carmen left the university after giving birth to her first daughter in 1987.5

More intimate violence shaped her life and work thereafter. Three years
later, when her second daughter “came I started having a job selling cars in an
automobile dealer. I had pretty good money selling cars,” she recalled. “But
my daughters’ father started being jealous.” He quit his post in the army and
left for California to stay with family there. When he returned to Mexico, Car-
men left him and joined the navy herself, but he took their two daughters
away to the state of Jalisco, where his parents lived. She was pregnant with
their third daughter, so she followed him. But he “still abused me, domesti-
cally, physically,” and she left him again.6

During her early twenties Carmen rarely held a job for long, usually due to
sexual harassment in the workplace. In Jalisco, she worked government jobs in
the Federal Electoral Institute, the National Institute of Statistics (Mexico’s cen-
sus bureau), and the state police. Then she took a post in a construction com-
pany working on highway projects, moving around with her daughters in tow.
She worked as a machinery assistant, haulage assistant, and then assistant ac-
countant. She observed, matter-of-factly, that “99.9 percent of women in Mex-
ico experience sexual harassment” at work, even if official statistics say less. “I
lost my jobs many times for that reason,” after standing up for herself and argu-
ing, “I have my job for my knowledge, not because I want to give my body.”7

Then in 1994, “the economic crisis came to Mexico, and everybody lost their
jobs.” NAFTA went into effect on New Year’s Day, stimulating increased for-
eign investment. But the economy crashed in the fall as investors pulled their
capital after an establishment presidential candidate was murdered and peas-
ants launched an armed insurrection in the southern state of Chiapas. Work-
ers in construction and a wide range of sectors lost their jobs.8

The displacement of Mexican peasants owed more to NAFTA directly,
which compounded a longer history of limited political support for rural de-
velopment along with environmental shocks, usually droughts. American cor-
porations flooded Mexico with heavily subsidized corn and other staples,
which now moved freely. Prices suddenly fell so low that it became impossible for small farmers to make a living.\textsuperscript{9} Mexican migration to the United States took off. From 1990 to 2007, the number of Mexicans in the United States increased from 4.3 million people to 12.6 million.\textsuperscript{10}

The great majority of Mexicans crossed the border illegally, as most had since 1965, when the United States imposed its first quotas on immigration from the Western Hemisphere.\textsuperscript{11} For most of the two nations’ history before then, Mexicans traveled back and forth more freely across the border. They often worked seasonally in agriculture in the southwestern states between Texas and California (the territory the United States took from Mexico in the Mexican-American War of the 1840s, even if many lived in “virtually peonage,” as the President’s Commission on Migratory Labor wrote in 1951.\textsuperscript{12} Many Mexicans also moved to Chicago for factory, railroad, and warehouse work.

The United States had a long history of recruiting Mexican labor but also of violently expelling Mexican people from the country. Most famously, the government began the Bracero Program in 1942 to address wartime labor shortages in agriculture. But starting in 1954, Operation Wetback rounded up and deported 3.8 million Mexicans, people who had entered with and without permission. The United States created seasonal work visas that would endure into the twenty-first century, though like the Bracero Program, these visas continued to legalize a fraction of the Mexican workers that farms, meat packers, and other employers demanded.\textsuperscript{13} After passage of the new quotas in 1965, the US Border Patrol and Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) increased deportation, expelling more than thirteen million people, mostly Mexicans, over the next twenty years. As historian Adam Goodman reported, “From the mid-1970s on, deportations averaged nearly 925,000 per year, or more than 2,500 each day.”\textsuperscript{14}

The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 legalized the status of almost three million Mexicans in the United States.\textsuperscript{15} But thereafter the act made it illegal for companies to knowingly hire people without papers, even if this usually went unenforced. Leaders in Washington increasingly militarized border enforcement with new weapons and surveillance technology.\textsuperscript{16} Ironically, this had the effect of keeping Mexicans without legal status in the United States, not out, by dramatically reducing their historical practice of more fluid, “circular” migration.\textsuperscript{17}

Even as the United States made it more illegal and dangerous for Mexicans to cross the border to work, the service and tech economy took off in the late twentieth century, boosting demand for low-wage workers in food and domestic service, construction, and other sectors. Agreements like NAFTA helped US corporations access foreign markets while reducing the cost of many goods
to US consumers, who now had more money to spend. But US politicians declined to extend the freedom of movement to Mexican people, meaning that most Mexicans who moved in this era lived in the United States illegally, where they were often exploited and had limited protections.

Under these conditions, even though Carmen was laid off from her construction job in 1995, she had no interest in migrating north. She had no family or friends to join there. She moved to Mexico City and began working as a secretary in an engineer’s office. She made only 400 pesos (42 dollars) a week, not enough to survive, but soon found a higher-paying job in the city’s 810-acre wholesale food market, the largest one in the Americas. Selling cilantro there from five to seven a.m. for 700 pesos a week, she also had more time to spend with her daughters.18

She was good at the job and soon started her own wholesale business. She partnered with a growing number of small farmers, many from the state of Puebla, just south of the city. Carmen paid for the seeds, fertilizer, and other expenses; the farmers supplied the land and labor; and they divided the profits from her sales of thousands of bunches of cilantro, radishes, onions, spinach, and other vegetables. “It was like, wow, the money was growing.” She bought a car and a truck. Her workforce grew to twenty employees. The only big downside was that she worked long hours and traveled a lot, so her oldest daughter, age ten, “became like a mother to the others.”19

In the early morning on December 24, 1999, after she “finished selling all my stuff in the market” around 3:00 a.m., Carmen and one of her employees got into the truck, headed for “planting lands in Puebla.” They gave a ride to another merchant’s thirteen-year-old son since he was tired and his father still had work to finish.20 About an hour later, on a narrow country road, a big truck passed them and then slowed to a stop. Fifteen armed men wearing masks jumped out and surrounded their vehicle, pounding on it with the handles of their guns and shooting into the air. They screamed threats at Carmen, her driver, and their young passenger until they opened the doors. Then they pistol-whipped the boy for not unlocking the door sooner. The men threw them into their truck, tied them up, and put tape over their mouths and eyes as they drove off, beating them with their pistols if they moved, while the boy’s head continued bleeding.21

Other wholesalers at the market had suffered violent robberies, but this was different. The masked gang held Carmen hostage for a week, until one of her colleagues paid 500,000 pesos ransom (over $50,000). “I cannot recount all the violence of this tragedy; those were moments in which our lives hung by a thread,” she said. “I made it out alive of that terrorist attack,” but it “marked my life and my young daughters . . . with pain that to this day hasn’t been erased.”22
“I was completely destroyed,” and “nobody supported me, nobody helped me, I was really frustrated . . . hopeless,” and in overwhelming fear. Her workers at the market needed to be paid, but she had no money. When they reported the crime, the police chief, a woman, refused to give her a copy of the crime report, instead asking Carmen, “Do you love your country?” The chief explained that if they filed the report, then the national crime statistics would get worse.

Carmen could not imagine where in Mexico it might be safe to make a living and raise her family. “I felt like [the kidnappers] knew everything about me, and I can build again my dreams, and they’re going to destroy it at any minute.” She “felt like there is no other option, as violence was spreading all over” the country. So she decided to seek safety in the United States. “My heart was torn apart because I had to be separated from my daughters. What a nightmare!”

“When I decided to cross the border, I decided to come with people who knew people in the US . . . had relatives in the US . . . to come with people who had some experience,” she said, in order “to feel safe.” A family she knew from Puebla had a relative who had lived in the United States a long time. They invited her to come to New York City, which was the largest center of Poblano population in the country. “Many people from Puebla traveled in that time,” leaving its small farming towns. A group of three women and five men, they flew from Mexico City to Hermosillo in the north, about three hours from Arizona, and traveled by bus through several towns along the border.

“The man in charge, the father . . . told me . . . he knew the coyotes [smugglers] at the border. He was supposed to have everything arranged.” But when they got off the bus in a small, dusty border town, Carmen learned he did not. The hotel had bed bugs, “the town was so uninhabitable . . . a very dangerous place; and also expensive.” Her carefully planned budget was decimated by the inflated prices in towns whose economies ran on gouging migrants. “All my money went away,” as they stayed about six weeks along the border, looking for a decent coyote. It took so long that she lost track of time and did not even know what month it was by the time they crossed the border.

Like many migrants, they made multiple attempts. The first coyote they hired was inexperienced and left them in the Sonora Desert after a day’s walk, saying he was going to check for the border patrol and would be back. When he had not returned a day and a half later, the group retraced their steps, fortunate that they remembered the way and had enough water and food. Later, in Tijuana, they found a coyote who took them three hours east, where they crossed the border in the desert near Yuma, Arizona. The border patrol “immediately arrested us on the other side,” took them to jail in Yuma, and put
them on a bus back to Mexico the next day. The same coyote waited for them and took them to Arizona again eight days later.30

After three nights walking in the desert, sheltering themselves from the sun and authorities by day, the coyote’s colleague picked them up in a van and drove them three hours west to Los Angeles. They stayed in a hotel where thirty people were waiting for rides to other parts of the country. The smugglers stuffed Carmen and her traveling companions into a van headed east, which was overfilled with people going to Colorado, Tennessee, New Jersey, New York, and Florida. After three days, hardly stopping, “just putting gasoline, eating a lot of hamburgers,” they arrived at a rest stop on the New Jersey Turnpike.31

Most of the passengers piled out of the van and headed for the bathroom, leaving Carmen alone with the father from Puebla. “I had no money, and the guy in charge of the group started to sexually abuse me.” He said he would pay the $2,500 for her coyote from Los Angeles to New York and she could stay with his family there but she had to sleep with him in return. She refused and told him she was fleeing sexual violence in Mexico. He threatened to call immigration authorities and have her deported. She ran out of the van into the cold winter air.32

She got back in for the ride to New York but refused to stay. The man demanded she repay him the $2,500 with interest. Two teenagers who were headed to Florida invited her to come with them and stay with their family there. She thanked them but instead called a phone number her sister had given her—a former neighbor of her sister in Mexico City, a single woman, who now lived in Norristown, Pennsylvania, outside of Philadelphia, to ask if she could go there. “For me it was so much better, because it was a woman who was going to give me a place to stay.”33

The following year, Carmen made the arrangements and paid the coyote fees to have her daughters join her in Norristown; they arrived in October 2001. Her mother accompanied them on the journey, following the same route that Carmen had taken through the Sonora Desert. Her mother returned to Mexico a month later.34

The New Latin American Migration

Eighteen years later, Carmen observed, “An immigrant in the United States is a slave, a slave to neoliberalism, a slave that is not seen as a human being, just as in the history of this country: The African American slaves were brought, and they were not seen as human beings with rights.”35 While Africans’ bond-
age served European imperialism and early national expansion, Mexicans and other immigrants living illegally in the United States moved and worked under the terms of a newer political economy. Still, much as in the age of colonization, in this era of liberalized markets and free trade, pacts like NAFTA favored the interests of global capital over the freedoms of people, particularly if they were working-class and had black or brown skin. Similar dynamics characterized the last era of mass immigration, around the turn of the twentieth century, when Americans did not consider Italian immigrants fully white and passed “Exclusion Acts” for Asians.\(^3\) Also echoing that era, a new—or in some ways new—set of movements grew up, alternately aimed at restricting and expelling or protecting and assisting working-class immigrants, especially people without legal status. These included the New Sanctuary Movement.

On the surface, the questions of why Mexicans migrated to the United States and what protections or assistance Americans might owe them recalled a history of economic interdependence among neighbors more than wars, at least in modern times.\(^3\) Mexicans were not refugees, and cases of asylum for Mexicans were exceedingly rare. Americans found it quite logical to label them “economic immigrants,” people simply seeking a better life in a wealthier country.

However, the history of US-Mexico relations, labor recruitment and demand, and border enforcement revealed clear patterns of structural violence that made sanctuary not only relevant but also justified and necessary in the eyes of its supporters. “We are neighbors of the most powerful, militarized country” in the world, Carmen remarked. The United States has long “abus[ed] the Mexican population through the governments that they handle like puppets.” As in other parts of the Americas, the United States “imposed neoliberalism” through trade deals and the terms of foreign aid and loans, along with support for militaries and authoritarian regimes. “Free commerce means all the corporations came to Mexico and made the rules,” eluding taxes and stealing wealth. Mexico is rich in natural resources—water, oil, mining. But US corporations like Coca-Cola and oil companies control much of those resources, while in 2010 one-third of Mexicans lived on less than five dollars a day.\(^3\) Mexican politicians also enabled and profited from organized criminals’ control of sectors ranging from narcotics to avocados. “The migration is a result,” said Carmen.\(^3\)

NAFTA and the US-supported drug war against Mexican cartels, which was launched in 2006, were just the latest chapters in this history. NAFTA “cut a wide path of destruction through Mexico,” observed a director of the Center for International Policy, a thinktank in Washington, DC. It displaced some two million Mexican farmers in the two decades after 1994.\(^4\) Compounding the
effects of NAFTA, the drug war caused a spike in violence in an already violent nation.\textsuperscript{41} Between 2006 and 2020, more than 73,000 Mexicans were reported “disappeared,” with many more missing from official reports.\textsuperscript{42} Violence toward women, which was already high, worsened, including rising rates of femicide.\textsuperscript{43} The United Nations ranked Mexico among the world’s most violent countries for women, along with its Central American neighbors.\textsuperscript{44}

The border region between Mexico and the United States added another layer to the violence people faced, as human traffickers and drug cartels took advantage of migrants for their money, their bodies, and sometimes their lives.\textsuperscript{45} Once in the United States, people’s illegal status limited their rights and mobility—the types of work they could do, access to drivers’ licenses, and a wide variety of police and social protections—and exposed them to further exploitation and physical violence. These were just some of the reasons how and why sanctuary mattered for Mexicans beyond the protections and access to services promised by the typical sanctuary city policy.

Carmen Guerrero and her daughters were increasingly the face of Mexican migration in the twenty-first century, and in some ways more generally the face of immigration in the United States and globally. First, they represented the broader feminization of migration, which was driven partly by interpersonal and structural violence and by shifting work opportunities. This included growing demand in wealthy countries for child and elder care, domestic service, and other work usually done by women. Children from Latin America crossing the border, with and without parents or guardians, likewise became more common.\textsuperscript{46}

Carmen’s settlement in Norristown reflected the new geography of Mexican migration and of immigration to the United States. As the American service economy boomed at the end of the twentieth century, immigrants, especially Mexicans, settled just about everywhere, well beyond the old gateways of Chicago, New York, and the Southwest. They went to places with no memorable history of immigrant settlement, such as North Carolina, Alabama, and Tennessee, or to places that had experienced little immigration for generations, like Philadelphia and most of the Rust Belt.\textsuperscript{47}

In the other big geographic change, most immigrants since the 1990s settled in the suburbs, no longer primarily in central cities. One reason was that by the end of the twentieth century, most jobs in the United States were in the suburbs. Moreover, after 1965 the growing proportion of immigrants coming with wealth and for high-paying jobs typically settled in well-off suburbs. Poorer immigrants, including Mexicans, more often settled in working-class suburbs, many of which had declined as employers and prior residents left. These trends contributed to a broader suburbanization of poverty and people
of color in places such as Norristown, Upper Darby, and other suburbs across the country.

While immigrants in the United States became more diverse in almost every way, Mexican migration dominated much of the nation’s increasingly heated immigration debates. These debates focused ever more on the estimated thirteen million people living in the country illegally by the 2000s, more than half of whom came from Mexico. By 2002, Mexicans made up 30 percent of all immigrants in the United States, seven times as much as people from the Philippines, the second-largest group at the time. An estimated 54 percent of Mexican immigrants in that year lived in the country illegally, and more than 80 percent of those who had come since 1990 lacked legal status, including most Mexicans in Philadelphia, which was a newer destination for Mexican migration.

Twenty-first-century immigration debates in the United States focused largely on illegal immigration’s costs and benefits for the nation and its receiving communities, and little on Mexicans’ reasons for moving. Conservative talk radio, cable news pundits, and restrictionist thinktanks lamented this “alien invasion,” its violation of the rule of law, and fiscal costs, which they deceptively claimed outweighed the benefits. More centrist, often corporate interests and many people on the left, embraced Mexicans’ low-wage labor in essential sectors. They celebrated the people who provided their food, cared for their children, mowed their lawns, remodeled their kitchens, and opened shops and restaurants. Advocates for immigrant rights, including immigrants themselves, more often recognized the structural violence against Mexicans and Mexico and were more aware of the extent of the physical violence and trauma they experienced.

One of the biggest ironies and injustices of all, some immigrant rights activists noted, was that working-class immigrants, again especially Mexicans, increasingly did the hard work of creating and sustaining wealth in the United States. Their low wages made middle-class living comfortable and affordable. Through their labor, and by opening stores and repopulating neighborhoods, Mexicans played multiple roles in revitalizing US cities and towns in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and dramatically so in Philadelphia. For the most part, other people, both native-born people and wealthier immigrants, reaped the benefits, whether through home values, inexpensive services, or Social Security payments that many unauthorized immigrants supported by paying taxes with no hope they would ever get the retirement funds themselves.

Mexican immigrants also played a central part in forcing Americans to confront what we owed immigrants and what sanctuary might mean in the
twenty-first century. As detailed in the introductory chapter, a new immigrant rights movement erupted after the US House passed a bill at the end of 2005 that would have made illegal immigration a felony rather than a civil offense and made assisting unauthorized immigrants also a crime. Much of this soon coalesced in the New Sanctuary Movement. Even more than the movement of the 1980s, this was a decentralized set of local groups that only occasionally came together to share and coordinate their advocacy. It was always a multicultural movement, but at least in its early years worked especially with Mexican communities in Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia.

Compared to many other groups of immigrants in recent decades, Mexican immigrant civil society necessarily focused more on claiming rights and assisting people without legal status. Mexicans also organized a transnational civil society to address some of the conditions that drove their migration. Often their work resembled that of other migrant communities, such as Liberian county associations and Southeast Asian community organizing. Still, issues of legal status, people’s position in the labor market, and generational changes in Mexican communities produced distinct patterns and histories.

Mexadelphia

Mexicans settled first in rural parts of the Philadelphia region, in the early 1970s around the mushroom-growing capital of the world, Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, thirty miles west of the city. Most came from the state of Guanajuato and many gained legal status with the 1986 immigration law. By the early twenty-first century, several thousand Mexicans and thousands of their children lived around Kennett Square. Across the river in New Jersey, Mexicans settled in the agricultural centers of Vineland and Bridgeton, where they picked tomatoes and blueberries, finding work in food processing and other jobs in the winter. Many others passed through rural parts of the region, moving up and down the East Coast seasonally, from harvesting peaches in Georgia to picking apples in upstate New York.53

The Suburbs

The post-NAFTA migration brought many Mexicans to the Philadelphia suburbs, with the largest number settling in Norristown. The origin story people tell is of a man of Italian descent who went to Acapulco on vacation and fell in love with a woman there, whom he brought back. She then invited family and friends, initiating a chain migration of people from central and southern
Mexico. Some came to work seasonally in landscaping and construction. Others stayed permanently, working year-round in janitorial, restaurant, and factory jobs. At least one landscaping firm that was employing people illegally got in trouble with the INS, which steered it and other area employers into the US guest worker program, recruiting men from Puebla. Many of these firms were owned by Italian Americans who had moved to nearby suburbs and rented their old homes to new arrivals. By 2000, the US Census reported that about 3,000 people of Latin American origin, mostly Mexicans but also Puerto Ricans, lived in Norristown, and almost 10,000 a decade later. Mexican immigration reversed population loss that the town had experienced since the 1970s as its textile mills and other factories shut down.54

People from Mexico also settled in other working-class, formerly industrial suburbs across the region, such as Upper Darby, Pottstown, and Lansdale. Michael Katz and Kenneth Ginsburg termed such places “reservations for low-wage labor.” Migrants found affordable rents in these towns and worked in homes, malls, and office parks in affluent suburbs nearby.55

Most people found jobs through family and friends who had already settled. Carmen Guerrero had less help, but her experiences were otherwise typical of Mexicans in the suburbs. “Looking through the newspapers in the trash cans, I started looking for a job. I cut out an ad and I showed it to a taxi driver and asked him to take me to that address,” she recalled. “I got to a hotel lobby and using my hands I signaled to the receptionist saying, ‘Working, working yo’’ [me] as I pointed a finger to myself.”56 A Filipina woman approached “me and asked ‘trabajo’ [work]? . . . and helped me to fill in the application.”57 Carmen worked at this Best Western near the King of Prussia Mall, the largest shopping mall in the East, for the next three years. She cleaned twenty to twenty-five rooms in a seven-hour shift, for $7.25 an hour. “The first weeks, I’d fill my stomach with tiny cookies, cheeses and chocolates that we’d put in baskets for the hotel visitor, until I got my first paycheck and I could buy some Chinese food. Ohhhh, what a feast!”58

These wages were not enough to cover her expenses plus debts to family in Mexico for her ransom and coyote fees. So, like many Mexicans, she sought a second job. She met a woman on a bus who pointed her to a dishwashing post at a Bob Evans restaurant. She worked seven-to-eight hours at the hotel, then seven-to-ten at the restaurant, “sometimes more on weekends.” Carmen justified her exhaustion since this allowed her to save money to bring her daughters to Norristown sooner.59 Over the next several years, she worked her way up at Bob Evans to the food prep line, then cook, then manager. She also worked at the Cheesecake Factory and California Pizza eateries at the mall. She kept her jobs at Bob Evans and the Cheesecake Factory when she left the
hotel in 2003, after a workplace injury that the hotel’s managers refused to acknowledge.⁶⁰

The apartment where Carmen first stayed “was so little . . . there was no room for” her daughters. Her host told her, “‘You can stay here, but you have to look for a place to live.’” Knowing few people, she saw other Mexicans mainly at the laundromat, where one day a man referred her to a house nearby, where she rented a spot.⁶¹ But so many people lived in this house, with mattresses and beds crammed into each room, that Carmen spent virtually all her waking hours elsewhere. She soon found a home to rent just across the river on the border between the small town of Bridgeport and King of Prussia, closer to the mall, where she and her daughters could have more space.⁶²

But when the girls arrived, administrators in the school district refused to enroll them. They threatened to report them to immigration authorities after Carmen could not show them a visa in her passport. She gave up the house and enrolled the girls in Norristown schools instead. They rented a small room in Norristown and later moved to a town house on a cul-de-sac in King of Prussia.⁶³

Mexican immigrants generally had decent relations with their landlords, employers, and neighbors in Norristown and Bridgeport, but local governments varied in their responses to their settlement, from sanctuary to exclusion. In 2003, Norristown’s city council passed an ordinance recognizing Mexicans’ consular identification cards as valid to access local schools, libraries, and health clinics. Copied from the Detroit suburb of Pontiac, Michigan, this ordinance also aimed to combat payday robberies. Council members got local banks to recognize the card, so Mexicans without legal status could put their earnings in the bank rather than keep cash in their pockets and homes.⁶⁴ Though distinct from policies limiting police and prisons’ cooperation in deportation, this offered a certain form of sanctuary, another limited act of protection and support.⁶⁵

In addition to safety and access to services, Norristown officials, including the town’s Kenyan economic development director, cited Mexicans’ role in revitalization as impetus for the act. Mexicans had repopulated the town, reviving its housing market and the commercial district on West Marshall Street. This area housed only a small cluster of Mexican groceries when Carmen arrived in 2000, but in the next several years it transformed as Mexicans opened a large and diverse set of stores. People started calling it “Little Mexico.”⁶⁶

Bridgeport’s council took an opposite stance in passing its Illegal Immigration Relief Act in October 2006. The act promised to fine and revoke the licenses of landlords and employers of people who were in the country illegally
and declared English to be the town’s official language. Mayor Jerry Nicola and the act’s sponsor, Councilman John Pizza, cited the rule of law and Congress’s failure to act on illegal immigration for their action, echoing Hazleton Mayor Lou Barletta, a fellow Italian American. Bridgeport leaders also expressed anxiety over their town’s revitalization and a fear that new immigrants might dictate its course. After the Pennsylvania Immigration and Citizenship Coalition advocacy group, which was based in Philadelphia, threatened to sue, they put the act’s implementation on hold as challenges to Hazleton’s law made their way through the courts.

Yet Norristown’s public response to people who were in the country illegally proved inconsistent, particularly in the actions of its police department. Initially, department leaders tried “to make a bridge between the Hispanic community and the police,” recalled Carmen, who participated in community safety trainings that they ran. As in other places, the police sought to build trust with immigrants so victims and witnesses of crimes would feel comfortable reporting them. As a union organizer who worked in the area noted, they did not want to make this new “part of the community ungovernable.”

But in the late 2000s, Norristown police began to set up checkpoints to verify that people had auto insurance, thus restricting unauthorized immigrants’ movement. One day in 2011, Carmen went to the police station to find the parking lot full of vehicles from ICE. “They had a big list of names.” Thereafter, Norristown police and ICE began raids targeting the local Home Depot and 7-Eleven parking lots, where men waited to be picked up for day labor. A city councilman explained to Carmen the police needed to cooperate with ICE in order to receive federal funds.

People who were in the country illegally navigated a fragmented landscape of policing and services in suburban Philadelphia and other regions, especially after 2005. This was a particular challenge for Mexicans and Central Americans, who were most often targeted by ICE. Riverside, New Jersey, also copied Hazleton’s act in 2006, only to repeal it a few months later. A decade later, nearby Bensalem, Pennsylvania, explored a 287g agreement with ICE to deputize its police as immigration agents. This sort of partnership was used mainly by counties in the American South. Bensalem’s mayor backed out in response to pressure from activists and the county’s human relations council. In other suburbs, police departments and town governments were more or less accommodating to immigrants who lacked legal status, rarely as a matter of official policy. Their response often varied depending on the politics of individual officers and employees of other agencies, from schools to town halls.
The City

Philadelphia was a sanctuary city, though in most ways Mexicans’ experiences of migration and settlement there closely resembled their experiences in the suburbs. As in the region at large, the greatest number of Mexicans came from rural origins, especially the state of Puebla. People from Puebla had settled in New York since the 1980s, and over time they found work and homes in the broader region from the Hudson Valley to southern New Jersey. A community from the town of San Lucas, Puebla, formed in the city of Camden, New Jersey, by the early 1990s.74

San Lucas sits in a valley between two snowcapped volcanoes, the dormant Iztaccihuatl (“white woman” in the Aztec language Nahautl) and Popocatepetl (“smoking mountain”), Mexico’s second-highest peak and most active volcano. An eruption in December 1994, spewing ash more than fifteen miles, prompted the evacuation of towns in the valley. This compounded farmers’ growing struggles to survive off their harvests and drove migration to the United States.75

Efren Tellez, a farmer from the next town over, San Mateo Ozolco, abandoned his corn fields and plum orchards in early 1995. He traveled to Camden to stay with a friend from San Lucas. As he looked for work, one day he walked across the mile-long Ben Franklin Bridge to downtown Philadelphia. After wandering around for a few hours, he spotted a sign he could read: “Tequilas Restaurant.” He walked in and got a job as a dishwasher in this upscale restaurant owned by Mexican chef David Suro. Tellez found a cheap room in a row house in South Philadelphia, close enough to walk or bike to work. He called home, encouraging family and friends to join him. A decade later, about half of San Mateo’s roughly 4,000 residents had moved to South Philadelphia.76

Mexicans’ housing and neighborhood experiences in South Philadelphia resembled those of Mexicans in Norristown and of Italians in both places a century earlier. They lived in brick row houses near old factories that were being converted to condos, renting largely from Asian and Italian American landlords. The first people to arrive were mostly men of working age, including many in their teens and twenties, who often traveled back and forth from Mexico before bringing or starting families and settling more permanently. They often lived together in large numbers so they could send more of their earnings home. All this echoed the earlier experiences of Italians.77

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, South Philadelphia’s Mexican community was made up mostly of young men, who experienced considerable violence and trauma. Some people called it an “island of men,” remembered Cristina
Perez from Women Organized Against Rape. Many had faced violence in their migration—abandoned in the desert, beaten by border patrol agents, robbed—even before cartel violence escalated in the mid-2000s. With fifteen to twenty people in a house, they experienced problems of theft, fights, and alcohol and sexual abuse among each other. When some of the first women arrived, including women in their teens and twenties living alone with multiple men, some suffered sexual harassment and rape, finding themselves effectively trapped by the men who had paid their coyote fees. As Jaime Ventura from San Mateo recalled, “We were too young, a lot of people who came were just kids, unprepared to live on their own.”

Mexicans in South Philadelphia found a mix of more and less regular employment. Some worked for Italian family businesses that were still in the area, though more found jobs in downtown restaurants, to a lesser extent in construction, and when women came, in hotel and home housekeeping and childcare. Some Mexicans also boarded the white vans that passed through the neighborhood in the early morning, picking up Southeast Asians, African Americans, and Latin Americans for day labor in suburban warehouses and chocolate factories. They spent long hours packing produce or cutting fruit salad and other prepared food sold at convenience stores like Wawa and 7-Eleven. Men from San Mateo most often took restaurant jobs because, as Ventura explained, “They would feed us, and we could eat well. This allowed us to save money on expenses, and to save more to send home.” It was also more regular and safer work than most construction jobs, where wage theft was more common, especially in day labor.

Mexicans did the most precarious jobs in construction, landscaping, warehouse packing, restaurants, and housekeeping. Their bosses and coworkers regularly subjected them to verbal abuse, calling them “dirty Mexicans” and worse. In some settings, especially construction, they kept Mexican laborers working long hours in tight spaces, unprotected from chemicals or dust, doing repetitive and exhausting tasks without breaks. Workplace injuries also occurred in restaurants and, especially in the late 1990s and early 2000s, young Mexican men and women working in restaurants were sexually harassed, abused, and sometimes raped. Some experienced verbal and sexual abuse from the drivers of vans taking people to day labor. Some men attained better construction jobs over time, including in a general contracting cooperative formed by Mexican carpenters who had been active in labor organizing. Many Mexicans opened their own restaurants and stores. But both structural and interpersonal violence at work persisted for many Mexicans who remained without legal status, insurance, or benefits, doing irregular and dangerous work.
Outside of the workplace, while relations with most neighbors in South Philadelphia remained peaceful, violence affected Mexicans’ everyday experiences. For restaurant workers, who were paid in cash and walked or biked home late at night from downtown, systematic muggings by African Americans and sometimes whites became routine. Italian, Irish, and African American neighbors sometimes harassed or threatened them. Mexicans learned to avoid the blocks where some of their neighbors sold drugs on the street. When some of the first teenagers living with their parents in the neighborhood went to South Philadelphia High School, they faced aggression from some of their classmates. A December 2009 attack by African American students who chased and beat up thirty teens recently settled in the area targeted mostly youth from China, but also a few Mexicans and a Dominican boy who suffered permanent hearing damage in one ear.82

In other ways, though, Mexicans’ relationships with most of their neighbors were deeply symbiotic, driving revitalization in a large swath of the city. Their labor served a growing population of young white families and other affluent residents, visitors, and businesses downtown and in surrounding neighborhoods, including South Philadelphia. Mexican busboys, dishwashers, and cooks provided the cheap and expandable workforce behind an unprecedented boom in high-end restaurants across these neighborhoods, making downtown and South Philadelphia world-renowned restaurant destinations.83

While poorer parts of the city continued to lose population, these areas grew enough starting in the 1990s that by 2007 the city was expanding again, thanks particularly to Mexican immigration. As one title in the Daily News in 2011 quipped, “Let’s put it this way: Philadelphia gained more amigos.”84

Mexican merchants reopened shuttered corner stores throughout South Philadelphia and revived the historic Italian Market on Ninth Street. Once a vital neighborhood shopping district and still a tourist attraction, the six-block-long market had declined as whites left for the suburbs. In 2001, the city’s planning commission certified the southern half of the market as blighted, noting a preponderance of boarded-up storefronts. But by 2008, every storefront was reopened or under renovation, mostly by Mexican merchants. Within a five-block radius from the market, Mexicans had opened eighty-five shops and restaurants, and they would open more in coming years.85

Initially, they ran just two types of business: restaurants serving other Mexicans and some other customers and small general stores with an array of groceries, household goods, phone cards, sometimes prepared meals, and in the back, money wiring, package shipping, and travel agent services.86 In the late 2000s a barber and a used bicycle shop opened, signaling that the community had grown enough to support specialized stores. Then Mexican mer-
chants opened bakeries and shops selling clothing, soccer shoes and jerseys in youth and adult sizes, music and electronics, religious statues, and dresses and decorations for quinceañera celebrations, Mexican girls’ coming-of-age religious services and parties held at age fifteen. In just a few years it had become a fast-growing community of families, some of whom were starting to buy homes.

Many Mexicans left the New York region after the September 11 attacks and more came from Mexico, many from Puebla but also from all over the country. Between 2000 and 2010, the city’s population of Mexican heritage, mostly people born in Mexico and their children, expanded from some 6,000 to over 15,000, according to the census. This was almost surely a substantial undercount, as demographers’ models could not fully account for the recent growth, nor completely make up for Mexicans’ low census response rates. By the later 2010s, Mexicans lived in neighborhoods all over the city and region, especially concentrated around Norristown, Bensalem, and Camden (see figure 5.1).

South Philadelphia remained the center of Mexican Philadelphia, however. One local newspaper dubbed the neighborhood “Mexadelphia” in 2006. Credit for the moniker “Puebladelphia” went to Marcos Tlacopilco, who, with his wife, Alma Romero, first worked at an Italian-owned fish market on Ninth Street, then bought the shop when their boss retired and died, and later opened a restaurant specializing in breakfast for people on their way to work.

People began to observe that the Italian Market had become just as much a Mexican market. In its northern blocks, where Italian cheese shops and butchers remained, the unofficial historic markers erected by a local historian accentuated the impression that, like other Little Italy districts, this part of the market had become an “ethnic Disneyland,” as another scholar averred. These and other signs on shops reminded visitors that Italians had been there longer, and their foods always “predominated.” A three-story mural of Frank Rizzo, the city’s notoriously racist police commissioner in the 1960s and mayor in the 1970s, also adorned this area. Mexican and Southeast Asian merchants, meanwhile, felt no need to defend their authenticity and claims to the area, since they largely served coethnic customers who lived in the neighborhood.

Other Italian Americans reacted to their Mexican neighbors with more blatant racism and xenophobia. “I AM MAD AS HELL! I WANT MY COUNTRY BACK!” read a sign that Joey Vento, owner of Geno’s Steaks, one of the city’s landmark cheesesteak shops on Ninth Street, pasted on the window where people made their orders. The sign just below it portrayed a bald eagle and an American flag. It read, “This Is America. When Ordering Please ‘Speak English.’”
Figure 5.1. Map of Mexican settlement in Philadelphia and its suburbs in 2010. (Source: US Census; map by Danielle Dong.)
In interviews with local media, Vento lamented that a politics of multiculturalism had eclipsed the politics of Americanization that his own immigrant grandparents had endured. They had “tried” but “had a hard time” learning English, and rarely left South Philadelphia. “Go back to the 19th century, and play by those rules,” he proposed. “I don’t want somebody coming here to change my culture to their culture,” he said. “They want us to adapt to these people. What do you mean, ‘Press 1 for Spanish’? English, period. Case closed. End of discussion.” He seemed unaware that Mexicans were learning English at a faster rate than Italians and Poles had a century earlier. And his critique of illegal immigration suggested his ignorance of the fact that the United States had virtually no restrictions on migration from Europe or the Americas in that era.

This rejection of new immigrants from Latin America and call for “English only” repeated much of the logic and rhetoric of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century nativism and assimilationism that had been directed toward Italians. Italians “became white” in the twentieth century partly through violence against their own new neighbors of color: opposing civil rights and Black Power, school desegregation and public housing for Blacks, including in South Philadelphia. Some turned this racism toward Mexicans in the twenty-first century.

Vento’s “Speak English” sign gained national attention in early 2006, as debates over illegal immigration blew up. He appeared on Lou Dobbs’s show on CNN, Fox News, and right-wing talk radio. Vento and his sign survived a discrimination charge by the city’s human relations commission, and he continued to push anti-immigrant messages locally and nationally. On occasion, he drove his Hummer SUV around South Philadelphia with a loudspeaker, denouncing businesses that employed “illegals” before heading home to suburban New Jersey. On New Year’s Day 2009, he sponsored a skit in the city’s annual Mummers parade, a century-old event that grew out of the racist tradition of minstrel shows. Titled “Aliens of an Illegal Kind,” the Philadelphia Inquirer related, a grinning Vento popped “out of the top of a float . . . with a ‘When ordering, speak English’ sign.” He tossed fake cheesesteaks into the crowd. Then an announcer cried out, “‘Uh-oh, here comes the border patrol!’” Band “members wearing Texas-sized cowboy hats and brandishing wooden rifles pretended to hold back a rioting crowd of ‘immigrants,’” white men in costumes that caricatured different cultures around the world, “from storming the” cardboard “border ‘fences.’ As the immigrants burst forth, they traded in their country’s flag for an American flag, and a Mummer dressed as President-elect Barack Obama handed out Green Cards.”
Vento became the largest individual donor to the legal fund defending Hazleton’s Illegal Immigration Relief Act and gave almost $67,000 to defend the state of Arizona’s similar law. Hazleton mayor Lou Barletta and Pennsylvania state representative Daryl Metcalfe traveled to South Philadelphia to raise money for Arizona’s legal defense fund with a talk radio show broadcast from under the neon lights of Geno’s façade.98 In the year before he died of a heart attack in 2011, Vento promoted Metcalfe’s movement to enlist state legislatures to repeal the US Constitution’s guarantee of birthright citizenship.99 This was part of Metcalfe’s nineteen-point platform to deny unauthorized immigrants and their US-born children everything from drivers’ licenses to housing and public services and to strip sanctuary cities of state funding.100

**Mexican and New Latin American Civil Society**

It was in this context that Mexican civil society in Philadelphia, Norristown, and other new immigrant destinations grew up, with a major focus on immigrant rights. At one of the protests held in front of Geno’s, Carmen Guerrero barely dodged a punch from one of Vento’s defenders, only pulled away from his swinging fist at the last moment by another activist.101 Yet standing up to anti-immigrant rhetoric and violence was just one part of a larger set of protections and supports that Mexicans and other Latin American immigrants and their allies built in the early twenty-first century.

**South Philadelphia**

Cristina Perez had worked just a few years at Women Organized Against Rape (WOAR), one of the first rape crisis centers in the United States, when she began to meet fellow Mexicans in South Philadelphia in 2000. While doing street outreach to find and support people who were experiencing abuse, she learned about the exploitation and violence that women and men faced at home and work. In 2002 she met Peter Bloom, who had taken time off from college along with a friend and recently begun holding volunteer English classes at St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church, which had started a mass in Spanish. As Bloom related, after class “there’d be a line of students with issues. They’d have pieces of paper that they needed translated . . . my boss didn’t pay me, or I need to find childcare for my kids, or my husband is beating me, how do I get out?” Bloom and his friend had no expertise in these issues, “but we could at least understand what the letter said.” They also had a space to “help the community . . . organize themselves.”102
In the run-down room the church provided them to work with Mexican immigrants, Perez and Bloom agreed on how they would pursue what she called “sanctuary work.” They embraced the critical pedagogy of Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire, a method of supporting oppressed people in regaining their humanity and overcoming their problems. Its proponents integrated human rights topics into classes such as English lessons, as Debbie Wei had done with her Southeast Asian students (discussed in chapter 2). Freire’s ideas deeply influenced South American liberation theology and consequently, the Sanctuary Movement. Perez had worked as a human rights activist in El Salvador and Nicaragua in the 1980s and recognized that “we needed to recreate the models of sanctuary that existed at the border” in that era. There in the room at St. Thomas Aquinas they “started to create a culture of sanctuary,” she recalled, in which people could feel welcome, identify their capacities and skills, and do the work of “repair,” addressing individual trauma and collective social problems.103

The early work of Perez, Bloom, and their partners focused on accessing services and confronting the violence that people experienced. Bloom recalled that Mexican people whom they met told them, “‘Our community’s growing really rapidly, and we’ve nowhere to go. . . . No one understands what our particular issues are, and all sorts of shit happens to us.’”104 People slowly began to talk about the violence and exploitation they experienced. Perez formed a group called Hombres en Transicion (“men in transition”), who worked to identify and help others confront the abuses and rights violations that Mexican immigrants faced. They did outreach at restaurants, where they met with groups of men and women and discussed issues of mental health and the challenges of finding help. They “invited a lawyer to come to the church to give a workers’ rights training,” related Bloom. And they appealed to the Mexican consulate downtown to “really understand that there was a growing population, that they weren’t getting the services they needed.”105

The consular identification card was particularly valuable for people who were in the country illegally. As Bloom explained, “[US] society is pretty much based on having an identity . . . in a very real, who are you, where do you live” sense. Accordingly, the first community organizing campaign that Mexican migrants working with Bloom and Perez launched sought “to get the Mexican Consulate to come out to the community, and . . . [help people] understand how this card could help them.” Like leaders in Norristown did around the same time, they spoke with “banks about accepting the card” so people could open accounts and avoid getting robbed of their cash. They also advocated for banks to hire Spanish-speaking tellers at branches in the neighborhood.106
When some of the women with whom Perez and Bloom were working, who had been raped crossing the border, decided to get abortions, it became time for them to leave the church. In January 2004, they opened Casa de los Soles (“house of the suns”), the first Latin American community center in South Philadelphia, in the ground floor and basement of a two-story row-house. There they incorporated the community-organizing and immigrant rights organization Juntos (“together”), which Bloom would direct. Along with English and computer classes, Casa de los Soles served as “a resource center and sanctuary for the community at large,” as early member and later Juntos board chair Carlos Pascual Sanchez put it. Juntos’s first two organizers, Mario Ramirez and Jaime Ventura, came from Mexico, though its constituency evolved from entirely Mexicans to also include Central and South Americans.

Their next campaign came from the Safety Committee that Juntos formed, led by Carlos Rojas, a restaurant worker from Mexico City. They met with police at Casa de los Soles multiple times and organized a community meeting on safety at a church, which was attended by over one hundred people. There, committee members negotiated an agreement with South Philadelphia’s police precincts to more actively patrol “safe corridors” where people returned home late at night from downtown jobs. The police also reaffirmed their commitment to protect the neighborhood’s immigrant community without asking about people’s legal status.

In 2006, Perez moved WOAR’s work with Mexican immigrants out of the row house it shared with Juntos, as they needed their own safe space for women and others experiencing abuse. WOAR continued to call the spaces it rented Casa de los Soles, and Perez expanded her work with Latin American women around the city. They adopted the community health promoters (promotoras) model of outreach, health education, and organizing by people in their own communities that is prevalent in Latin America. In the late 2000s, some 300 promotoras worked with WOAR, mainly in recent immigrant communities.

For a few years the organization rented a prominent space on Broad Street in South Philadelphia to work with an even wider range of people on labor violence, discrimination, mental health, and HIV/AIDS, as well as domestic violence and rape. Though it closed after 2015 due to a lack of funds, people in the neighborhood’s Latin American communities spoke about Casa de los Soles as if it existed long afterward, Perez reflected. They saw it “in our hearts,” as a sort of “sanctuary inside ourselves.”

Juntos continued to work with many of the same Mexican community leaders, organizing to address other areas of immigrant rights. In 2007, it moved to the Houston Community Center, not far from the row house it vacated.
Its Latin American constituents joined Asians and African Americans in the English and computer classes run by the center. While Juntos staff still helped people with any problem they brought in the door, its committees of community members took on more focused campaigns. They recognized, organizer Zac Steele related, that “we needed to help people solve their individual social issues,” including medical, legal, school, housing, and other needs, “in order to engage them in organizing.” However, he explained, “We do not want to be a service organization” because in that model “you are just helping somebody without changing the structure of inequality that produces the problem.”

As more children were born and grew up in South Philadelphia’s Mexican community, people who were involved in Juntos formed an Education Committee. This group of mostly women, led by Irma Zamora and others, forced the school district to improve language access for parents and students in neighborhood schools. They organized Latin American parents to engage with teachers, administrators, and school programs. With partners around the city, they repeatedly fought proposed funding cuts to the district office that supported English language learners and their families, which Debbie Wei ran for a time. They collaborated with Asian communities and organizations in response to the violence at South Philadelphia High in 2009, and thereafter partnered with the Southeast Asian organization SEAMAAC and its Indonesian constituents to engage in parent organizing together. Some of their work helped improve the culture and sense of community at schools such that wealthier parents became more willing to send their children to neighborhood public schools. This was yet another way that Mexicans and other working-class immigrants enabled gentrification.

Workers’ rights remained a constant area of Juntos’s work. Staff connected individuals to Community Legal Services, hospitals, and health clinics to redress wage theft and workplace injuries. In 2008, Mexican and Central American men from Northeast Philadelphia approached Juntos about abuses by contractors who hired them at a Home Depot parking lot. Twenty percent of the time they were not paid, and many experienced unsafe and illegal working conditions, sometimes even being abandoned at faraway work sites. Working with the Philadelphia Area Project on Occupational Safety and Health (PhilaPOSH), Juntos ran know-your-rights and safety trainings and organized these men to protect and advocate for themselves. With Community Legal Services they won an $18,000 judgment for ten workers who had been denied pay. Juntos Labor Committee members and partners at PhilaPOSH, including labor organizer and later Juntos board chair Javier Garcia Hernandez, also did outreach and trainings with restaurant workers. Later, they supported the
establishment of a chapter of the national Restaurant Opportunities Centers to carry forward this work.\textsuperscript{116}

In US traditions of community organizing, organizers typically build non-profit organizations like Juntos, PhilaPOS\textsuperscript{H}, and WOAR. But in Mexican and other Latin American traditions, people practice a great deal of community organizing and solidarity work outside formally incorporated institutions. Many of the leaders involved in Juntos and WOAR, such as Carlos Pascual Sánchez, Carlos Rojas, Maximino “Charro” Sandoval, Irma Zamora, and others, engaged in organizing and assisting other immigrants in numerous ways both in and outside organizations. According to Ricardo Diaz Soto, a doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania who became involved with fellow Mexicans in South Philadelphia starting in 2004, the “natural leaders” in the community could be found among the women who were most involved in the churches, merchants such as the Tlacopilcos, and the captains of soccer teams, such as “Charro” Sandoval, a community leader from San Mateo Ozolco who served on Juntos’ board.\textsuperscript{117}

Diaz Soto began by hanging out at a soccer field in the neighborhood where Mexican men played, and soon some players asked him to help organize what became the Amistad Soccer League, based at another field at Fourth and Washington Avenue. As he recalled, it “was created as a place to offer social services and reach those that would not come out to church.” At its peak in the mid-2000s, “every Sunday I met with near 600 people that came to watch the games. . . . Our immigration lawyer would sit at one corner of the field, the HIV testers by the basketball court, and the food vendors,” who were coordinated by the Tlacopilcos, “took turns instead of competing for customers.” They raised funds to refurbish the playground at Fourth Street but met resistance from neighbors when they tried to name it after Mexican American farm labor leader Cesar Chavez.\textsuperscript{118}

After the US House of Representatives passed the bill further criminalizing illegal immigration in December 2005, Diaz Soto initiated the first “Day Without an Immigrant” protest in the nation. He engaged merchants, soccer players, people at churches, and Juntos and other groups to organize a rally downtown on Independence Mall. People from the short-lived Orgullo Azteca (“Aztec pride”) association of Mexican merchants, led by its treasurer Marcos Tlacopilco, raised funds for the event.\textsuperscript{119} Organized as a workers’ strike on Valentine’s Day 2006, one of the busiest days of the year for restaurants, it underlined the importance of undocumented workers in that industry which Americans increasingly saw as central to the economies and vitality of their cities.

Similar rallies and marches erupted in cities across the country that winter and spring, including more in Philadelphia. Immigrant rights groups launched
campaigns targeting members of Congress and other politicians, and lobbied for sanctuary city policies after the passage of Hazleton’s restrictive act that summer. While Diaz Soto’s Day Without an Immigrant coalition faded, Juntos and other organizations remained involved in similar advocacy.

In 2007, Juntos members and staff were among the first to join the New Sanctuary Movement of Philadelphia (NSM), which was initiated by Pastor Margaret Sawyer and Peter Pedemonti of the Catholic Workers house in North Philadelphia. Manuel Portillo was one of the only early members connected to the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s, and he oriented others to some of that movement’s pitfalls of paternalism and racism. Like the movement of the 1980s, at the start this new interfaith coalition involved mainly white churches and synagogues, but later Black churches and sometimes mosques also joined. Initially, Juntos’s Immigration Committee, including Carlos Pascual Sanchez and others, was its largest conduit for involving immigrants, who increasingly took leadership roles in NSM.

In 2010, NSM and Juntos stepped up advocacy for a stronger sanctuary city policy, after the Obama administration expanded the Secure Communities program begun under George W. Bush to force local authorities’ collaboration with ICE. As Juntos organizer and NSM board member Zac Steele averred, “The police-ICE relationship . . . is like a covenant of the old Sanctuary Movement, a government practice that is violating God’s law that is objectionable.” They organized a community forum attended by over 400 Latin Americans and leaders of Haitian, West African, and other communities. There, Mayor Nutter’s deputy for public safety announced that the city would stop sharing data on victims and witnesses of crime with ICE.

Four years later, facing further pressure from NSM, Juntos, 1Love Movement, and fellow advocates organized as the Philadelphia Family Unity Network, the mayor signed the executive order creating one of the nation’s strongest sanctuary policies. As Peter Pedemonti explained, it was their Southeast Asian allies in 1Love who inspired NSM and other partners to insist that even people convicted of the most serious felonies should be shielded from deportation after doing their time in prison. The leaders of 1Love made a compelling case that they were equally valued members of families and communities, who were just as deserving as anyone of sanctuary protections and of a second chance after their incarceration.

In the 2010s, Juntos’s director position passed to a number of Latin American women, including community organizer Erika Almiron, who was the daughter of immigrants from Paraguay. Their work focused ever more on youth. As issues of gender identity and LGBTQ rights gained prominence in the nation at large, Juntos’s leaders helped Latinx young people advocate for
themselves and navigate the challenges of growing up in communities with entrenched histories of machismo and traditional views of gender and sexuality. With the election of Donald Trump, Juntos’s sanctuary work likewise intensified, the details of which are recounted in the final section of this chapter.

While Juntos, NSM, WOAR, and others made sanctuary and human rights a core focus of Mexican and Latin American civil society, people formed organizations in the 2000s to meet various educational, health, and social needs. In many ways they resembled civil society in other communities. Yet their work also underscored the barriers and injustices that Mexican immigrants faced and how they largely had to build support systems for themselves. One of the earliest was a bilingual Head Start program for some of the first young children born in or brought to Philadelphia by Mexican parents, which was run by Dalia O’Gorman, a woman from Mexico.

Beginning in 2002, Rosalva Ruth-Bull, who was born in Cancun and played for the Mexican women’s national soccer team, ran soccer leagues for men, women, and children in South Philadelphia, leading as many as fifty-two teams. Though not overtly focused on accessing services like the Amistad league, which faded later that decade, her women’s league was an important venue for promoting women’s empowerment. Women from Mexico, especially rural areas, rarely played soccer growing up. Therefore, this challenged traditional gender roles, and some of their husbands and boyfriends resisted their involvement in the league. Ruth-Bull confronted some women’s partners about this, and Carlos Pascual Sanchez and other men helped watch their kids during practice and games, making their participation possible. The league also served as an informal setting for people to help each other with small and big problems, including connecting to services. Team captains like Irma Zamora became important mentors to other women.

However, the soccer leagues also pointed up the precariousness of Mexicans’ claims to space and the ironies of their roles in neighborhood revitalization. Ruth-Bull’s teams initially played at Columbus Square Park, but neighbors complained. It was not the Italian American neighbors, who appreciated the sport and welcomed them. Rather, it was the “white, younger professionals, with a burgeoning gay community, and . . . tree-hugging families,” said the assistant director of the women’s league, a young American woman. They voiced concerns about property values and revitalization, which were laden with undertones of racism. “When it comes to money,” she averred, “people are willing to turn in their values.” Similar opposition to immigrants’ soccer games and gatherings was repeated in city and suburban parks across the country, whether in the name of property values, environmental protection, historic preservation, or less veiled racism.
Ruth-Bull and her teams did much to improve the park, revitalizing a dusty patch of dirt into a well-manicured field. She used her own money for supplies at first, and later became a seasonal grounds worker for the city’s Department of Recreation since she was already doing the job. Yet neighbors and city officials proposed moving the leagues to FDR Park, three miles away and tough for players to access between work, family, and other responsibilities. In the end, they moved to a closer recreation center, which had another dusty field that needed sprucing up.\(^{130}\)

The organization formed out of South Philadelphia’s Mexican community that developed the greatest set of services was Puentes de Salud (“bridges to health”). Started in 2003 by three physicians from the University of Pennsylvania, Steven Larson, Jack Ludmir, and Matthew O’Brien, along with nurse Rebecca Bixby, they sought to ensure access to good health care for people who lacked insurance. Ludmir grew up in South America and led the region’s top maternity ward at Pennsylvania Hospital. He became the chief obstetrician for babies born to Mexican women, even as other hospitals’ wards closed and struggled with the costs of serving people who were uninsured.\(^{131}\) Larson, whose mother was Puerto Rican, had worked at a clinic serving Mexican farmworkers in Kennett Square. O’Brien and Bixby worked with Alma Romero Tlacopilco, Irma Zamora, and others in Juntos’s Health Committee to form a promotoras team and its health education programs.\(^{132}\)

The Puentes de Salud health clinic in South Philadelphia grew progressively over the years. From seeing patients one day a week at Casa de los Soles and the basements of churches, the Houston Center, or St. Agnes Hospital on Broad Street, they opened a new, full-service health and wellness center in a building donated by the university in 2015. It was funded partly by world-famous restauranteurs whose workforce Puentes served. In the new facility, Latin American immigrants came from nearby suburbs and states as well as Philadelphia. The clinic sometimes also served Africans, Iraqis, and other immigrants and refugees, related its administrator, Carlos Pascual Sanchez.\(^{133}\)

Seeing that other organizations remained focused on immigrant rights, Puentes’ leaders began a range of social and education programs. First they ran after-school tutoring for children of Mexican parents, with college student volunteers joining the medical students who helped staff the clinic. Over the years they expanded with the Puentes Hacia el Futuro (“bridges to the future”) youth education program, Lanzando Lideres (“launching leaders”) for teenagers, Puentes a las Artes (“bridges to the arts”), and yoga. These programs spanned a continuum from early childhood education and literacy to homework help, summer camp, and SAT and college prep for high schoolers.\(^{134}\) Puentes also helped the Mighty Writers youth literacy program start a branch
for children from Spanish-speaking families on Ninth Street, where Alma Romero Tlacopilco volunteered to prepare and deliver breakfasts five days a week for its students.\textsuperscript{135}

As Juntos, Puentes, and other organizations served an increasingly diverse Latin American constituency, Mexicans in South Philadelphia established forums specifically for Mexican cultural expression. This was not just a matter of recreation but also of people’s rights to space and to their own culture and identity. Community leaders from San Mateo, led by David Piña, started the San Mateo Carnavalero in 2007, a large annual parade and festival celebrating the Mexican army’s defeat of the French in the Battle of Puebla on May 5, 1862. The event drew thousands of people from as far away as New York and Maryland.\textsuperscript{136} People from San Mateo and other towns where people spoke Nahuatl started six Aztec dance troupes. While schools and other institutions in Mexico often suppressed indigenous traditions and identities, migration offered opportunities to get in touch with and express them more freely.\textsuperscript{137}

In 2009, Dalia O’Gorman and Juntos board member Leticia Roa Nixon opened the Casa Monarca cultural center in a South Philadelphia row house. This was a community-based alternative to the Mexican Consulate’s cultural center, whose events at places like the downtown symphony hall attracted more affluent audiences. In the next decade, after Casa Monarca closed, Carlos Pascual Sanchez helped the Fleisher Art Memorial, a free arts school founded in 1898 for Jewish immigrants in the neighborhood, to begin bilingual classes, engage more Mexican artists, and start an annual Day of the Dead celebration, an important holiday in Mexico on the day after Halloween. Its parade through the Italian Market ended with a Mariachi band and Aztec dance at Fleisher’s Sanctuary, a former church where artists and community members adorned the altar with the customary blanket of flowers.\textsuperscript{138}

Radio stations helped connect and assist people in Mexican Philadelphia from early on. Spanish-language radio mobilized support for the immigrant rights marches in 2006 and later years.\textsuperscript{139} In 2013, Edgar Ramirez, a community leader from Oaxaca who was involved in Puentes, Juntos, the Carnavalero, Casa Monarca, and other groups, formed Philatinos Radio. It was a digital station and served myriad purposes, from information, entertainment, and cultural programming to helping people access services and promoting workers’ rights.\textsuperscript{140}

South Philadelphia Mexican restaurants and their owners also played key roles in civil society, as demonstrated in the work of the Tlacopilcos, and some attracted national attention to the community and its issues. In 2016, \textit{Bon Appetit} magazine named South Philly Barbacoa one of America’s best new restaurants. Its undocumented chef and owner, Cristina Martinez, received
multiple nominations for the prestigious James Beard chef’s award in subsequent years. The increased media attention gave her a national platform for her immigrant rights advocacy. With her husband and coowner, Ben Miller, she formed a cooperative making masa corn meal, which Carmen Guerrero joined as a member. When the coronavirus pandemic hit in 2020, they started the People’s Kitchen, making 1,000 meals a week for people out of work. The Tlacopilcos’ restaurant Alma del Mar was featured on national television that summer with a makeover on the Netflix show Queer Eye.

The most enduring institutions in many Mexican immigrants’ lives were churches. “The church is the first place people go looking for services . . . the first place people come together,” said Irma Zamora. Their basements were the most accessible “public spaces,” noted Carlos Pascual Sanchez: they provided places to gather, talk, and launch projects together, including with Juntos, Puentes, and other groups. Almost always at least one priest or nun in each Catholic parish in South Philadelphia spoke Spanish. They accompanied people to the doctor, translated, and connected them with a wide variety of social, legal, and health services, too.

In 2013, St. Thomas Aquinas church opened the Aquinas Center in its shuttered convent. Its new programs included counseling for mental health, domestic violence, and parenting, as well as ESL classes, know-your-rights trainings, food-based micro-enterprises, and a Hispanic Leadership Institute promoting professional career paths. It ran cultural festivals, a community garden, and a bike-sharing station largely for people who worked in downtown restaurants. Some of these programs served specific constituencies but most promoted interaction among the neighborhood’s diverse immigrant and African American communities.

Norristown and the Suburbs

In Norristown, as in the suburbs at large, Latin American civil society remained smaller than in the city, though it expanded in the twenty-first century. Latin American Community Action of Montgomery County (ACLAMO) in Norristown and Pottstown originated with the older Puerto Rican communities in these towns. Its constituency shifted with new immigration. However, after its director, a Cuban refugee, expressed his opposition to illegal immigration in the local newspaper, many new immigrants avoided the organization and its programs.

However, other people formed programs and partnerships to support newcomers in the area. In 2011, Mexican artist and University of Pennsylvania lecturer Obed Arango opened the Centro de Cultura, Arte, Trabajo y Educación
Initially serving a handful of families in after-school and computer classes, by the end of the decade its membership counted over 250 families. The center’s long list of programs, which were initiated and taught by community members and volunteers, included arts, media and technology, environment, language and literacy, health, sports, and college and career development. CCATE structured much of this work as participatory action research in which members conducted research addressing social, economic, and environmental inequities they faced, using their findings to shape programs and make policy recommendations to different levels of government.

Some of the new services and organizing among immigrants in Norristown and nearby suburbs gained traction via the Montgomery County Latino Collaborative. This network formed in the late 2000s through the work of Ludy Soderman, the liaison to community-based organizations at Family Services of Montgomery County, whose mother was Puerto Rican. Its meetings aided communication and service coordination among ACLAMO, CCATE, clergy, and school district officials in Norristown, among other public agencies and nonprofits in the county. Carmen Guerrero was also a member. The collaborative faded after Soderman left to direct the Philadelphia School District’s Office of Multilingual Family Support.

But ACLAMO expanded and transformed its relationship with new immigrants, especially after 2015, when it hired a new director, Nelly Jiménez-Arévalo, a Venezuelan who had worked at Latin American organizations in Kennett Square and North Philadelphia. She and her colleagues rejected the notion that organizations serving Latin Americans could work with a single segment of the community. Recognizing that public funds often cannot be used to serve people without legal status, they raised money from private and philanthropic sources to bring services for people without papers up to the same level as those for people with papers. “Everything I do, I think of all my people the same,” Jiménez-Arévalo asserted, “and I’m going to offer the same high-quality services to everybody.”

From relatively modest social service and ESL programs, ACLAMO developed a large set of new educational, health and wellness programs; housing counseling and assistance; a food pantry; a girls’ empowerment group; a fatherhood program; and more. Its leaders pushed other agencies and health clinics in the county to improve access and services and stop discriminating against Latin Americans. ACLAMO opened a new office in Lansdale as the Latin American community grew in that part of the county. And like Puente de Salud, it formed a group of community and health promoters, thus giving
the community greater ownership and leadership of the organization and its work.\textsuperscript{154}

In most suburbs, though, Catholic and Evangelical churches remained the chief, and often the only, formal community organizations assisting new Latin American immigrants. La Puerta Abierta’s therapy and mentoring programs for Latin American youth (noted in chapter 1) were one exception. La Comunidad Hispana ran social and health programs in rural Kennett Square, while CATA—the Farmworkers Support Committee—promoted workers’ rights in Kennett and Bridgeton, both organizations initially founded and sometimes still run by Puerto Ricans.\textsuperscript{155}

Some people, however, pursued community work in the suburbs less formally, and probably no one more actively than Carmen Guerrero. In her first few years in the country, she “saw a lot of injustices,” harassment and racism at work, school, on the bus. She heard people on the street and in the news say “so many negative things about me and other people from my country.”\textsuperscript{156} “When I spoke to other people from my country, they had the same” experiences and found no organizations that would help. “I decided to do something that would show us as people with values and culture in the face of a society blind with hate.”\textsuperscript{157} She started knocking on doors of people’s homes and businesses in Norristown, “organizing each other like in Mexico.” First, in 2003 they held a festival for Mexican Independence Day, September 16, which was attended by over 1,000 people in the town’s largest park. They would continue to organize Mexican cultural events, sometimes with ACLAMO and area churches.\textsuperscript{158}

The festival “marked an important point in my work in the community,” Carmen noted, “as people sought to continue” the effects it yielded, especially to “help people in the community see us as Human Beings full of dignity and friendship.”\textsuperscript{159} Soon after the first event, a man named Jonathan Schmidt “arrived to my house,” and “signaling with his hands, while I spoke a little bit of English . . . he invited me to be part of some community meetings” of his Southeast Pennsylvania First Suburbs Project. He said, “Come, there’s no one who represents Hispanics here, you are a leader.” But “I was afraid to open my heart to him, because he looked like a police officer,” she recalled. Actually, he was an attorney at a big law firm in Philadelphia, and First Suburbs was his project outside work, uniting people to address the social and economic challenges of the region’s working-class suburbs.\textsuperscript{160}

Carmen began to attend the First Suburbs meetings. There, organizers from the Service Employees International Union invited her to help reach out to immigrant janitorial workers. She began to visit office buildings at night, across
the suburbs and the city. “I [was] afraid to drive, to be in these places, because maybe the police [were] going to” pick her up, she recalled. But “I saw how little money people are making for their work. Not only people who are undocumented, but also people who had green cards. I couldn’t believe that people who had papers were abused this way.”

At First Suburbs meetings, “all the time I brought my notebook . . . trying to catch the words in English,” and “slowly, I had more connections.” Her English improved, “and finally we started [being] more active in the community . . . and people started recognizing me as doing many things, like translating in hospitals, in police stations, and in the schools. It was exhausting work for me, because I also needed to do two jobs. This made me really, really tired. But I love it.” In 2007, she began volunteering as a counselor and legal advocate at the nonprofit Women’s Center of Montgomery County, helping victims of domestic violence. They gave her all the Spanish-speaking clients, whom she met after hours at the center’s offices around the county.

The escalation of immigration debates after 2005, and the expansion of deportation, changed Carmen’s work. With the Pennsylvania Immigration and Citizenship Coalition and other groups she visited politicians in the region and in Washington, DC, advocating for the Dream Act to protect and support people who were brought to the United States illegally as children, like her daughters. Then came the first major ICE raids on janitorial and landscaping workers around King of Prussia, in 2007. Carmen and colleagues formed a women’s group, supporting children and families of people who were deported. “I kept in my house four women with children after the raids, and three children because they didn’t have parents after the raids.” People from the nascent New Sanctuary Movement “came with so much food, and they gave money to the families . . . connected them with attorneys,” and helped find homes for the children. This drew Carmen into work with NSM, Juntos, PhilaPOS, and attorneys from HIAS-PA and Friends of Farmworkers (later renamed Justice at Work).

Carmen and her partners in Norristown started a “Sunday school” in the parking lot of one of her employers, where attorneys and organizers provided know-your-rights trainings. They continued this work in people’s homes, adding ESL classes and support for women who were experiencing domestic abuse. They organized groups of day laborers and students, mainly from Mexico, to address various human rights issues. They formed the Greater Norristown Association of Latino Businesses and held mobile consulate events in Norristown with Mexican, Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran consular staff from Philadelphia and New York. When bus companies refused her business, Juntos’s leaders helped Carmen arrange buses to bring people to
marches in Washington, DC. Carmen and her colleagues also joined other communities’ campaigns, such as rallies for Palestinian rights and sovereignty. But following another set of ICE raids in 2011, the Norristown area became, for a time, the site of the second-most deportations in the country. Carmen and her allies won a partial victory, however, when they organized to stop police and ICE checkpoints in the town.\(^\text{164}\)

In 2012, after Carmen experienced a debilitating bout of Lyme disease, “my daughters retired me” from her day jobs and became her partners in activism. That June, President Obama signed an executive order creating the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, since Congress had repeatedly failed to pass the Dream Act. The following year Carmen’s daughters began organizing other young women, in part to help one another take advantage of the protection from deportation and the authorization to work and attend college that DACA promised. Working with their mother, who took a growing leadership role in the group, they helped women to access child care and schooling, information about labor rights, and legal aid for family members detained by ICE. They also began meditating, knitting, and cooking together.\(^\text{165}\)

As Carmen related, they would ask one another “‘for what are you good? What is your power?’ We empower . . . each other, because some would say ‘I’m good for nothing.’” Thus, part of their work became identifying women’s unrecognized capacities, “because we are vulnerable people . . . we don’t have stability,” due to legal status and abuse by employers, governments, and men in their lives. They organized monthly health workshops with doctors and an acupuncturist and started a community garden. This was “another way to grow,” employing Mexican women’s knowledge and skills from their largely rural and indigenous backgrounds. When men asked to join the group in 2016, they changed its name from Mujeres Luchadoras (“fighting women”) to Coalición Fortaleza Latina (“coalition of Latina strength”). Their mission, Carmen explained, was to empower each other, educate themselves, “to be respected and to know our human rights,” and to help themselves and others realize those rights.\(^\text{166}\) As in many immigrant communities, this work was just as active in “informal,” unincorporated groups and networks like theirs as it was among more institutionalized nonprofits—both locally and transnationally.

Transnational Communities and Development

Mexican communities in the United States have a strong tradition of transnational community development and have always lived transnational lives. Older
communities in California, Texas, Chicago, and New York had long-established hometown associations through which migrants organized to invest in schools, health clinics, churches, and even roads, parks, water and electrical infrastructure; and sometimes in agricultural and other enterprises as well. Some played large roles in cultural affairs and political and community organizing in their home regions. In these parts of the United States, they formed federations of hometown associations that gained significant political and economic influence in Mexico. Politicians in Mexico responded by developing the Tres-por-Uno (three-for-one) program in 2001, through which local, state, and federal government authorities matched migrants’ investments in infrastructure projects.  

As a newer destination for Mexican migrants, Philadelphia lacked such institutionalized transnational development. But new migrants all sent remittances to family, and they formed hometown associations engaged in various organizing, advocacy, and community development. “Mexicans always help their communities in Mexico,” said Edgar Ramirez. “Almost all towns raise money and send it, . . . they fix schools, purchase things people need, rebuild churches, etc.” Individuals sent much of their earnings to their families, especially, but not only, when the community consisted mainly of single people. These funds paid for basic necessities, building and expanding homes, keeping siblings in school longer, and subsidizing family businesses. Like countless other towns in Mexico with economies dependent on remittances, San Mateo Ozolco and other parts of rural Puebla developed a landscape of “remittance houses,” which were larger and better furnished than their neighbors. Small shops dotted seemingly every corner, most of which lacked a sufficient customer base to survive without remittances (see figure 5.2). These were some of the most important urban changes produced by Mexican migrants.  

Because their settlement coincided with a revolution in telecommunications, Mexican immigrants lived ever more “virtual” transnational lives. In the late 1990s, people in South Philadelphia could still find pay phones on street corners, Carlos Pascual Sanchez remembered. At the back of Mexican-run stores in the neighborhood, people paid to use computers to Skype with family and friends back home. For a time, one merchant opened an entire Skype parlor, as part of the short-lived rise of Internet cafes. But then everyone got a smartphone, joined social media platforms, and could communicate constantly with people across borders.  

As in other regions of the United States, Mexican communities with large numbers of people from specific towns sometimes formed their own leadership structures. These mirrored town governments but without the same authority or resources. They helped manage communication with leaders at home and gave newcomers from the town someone they could turn to for in-
formation and assistance with all sorts of issues, from problems with landlords or housemates in Philadelphia to supporting family members in Mexico. People from San Mateo Ozolco elected Maximino “Charro” Sandoval as their leader for many years.172

The church was another venue for transnational connections. People imported statues of their hometowns’ patron saints, including from San Mateo and nearby Domingo Arenas. They held formal ceremonies to install them in South Philadelphia Catholic churches and paraded the statues through the neighborhood on their saint’s days and at the start of the Carnavalero festival.

In the 2000s, Juntos played a substantial role in supporting transnational organizing and development. Its first community organizer, Mario Ramirez, returned to Mexico City in the mid-2000s and incorporated “Juntos Mexico.” He began holding charlas (“talks”), which were largely informal discussions counseling people who planned to migrate north. Like other service organizations and many priests in Mexico, he sought to debunk the myths they had heard about the United States being an easy place to live and make money and

---

**Figure 5.2.** A “remittance house,” shop, and bakery built by early migrant Efren Tellez’s family in San Mateo Ozolco, Mexico. (Photo by Domenic Vitiello, 2007.)
to otherwise prepare people for the realities of migration and life in the North. This included raising their awareness of issues of immigrant rights and know-your-rights training before crossing the border.  

With migrants from San Mateo Ozolco, Domingo Arenas, and the village of Oyometepec in another part of the state of Puebla, Juntos staff and board members in Philadelphia pursued other political work. They organized people in Philadelphia and Mexico to advocate against the privatization of these towns’ water sources, which politicians threatened to sell to corporations. In Oyometepec they launched a reforestation campaign, in which people from San Mateo also helped. They reclaimed and planted ejido lands, which technically belonged to the village residents collectively but where local politicians had enriched themselves by allowing a logging company to clear the forest. Halting the illegal taking of ejido lands, a widespread problem in Mexico, was an aim of Juntos’s organizing in all three towns.  

The hometown association Grupo Ozolco, which was led by “Charro” Sandoval, Juntos’s second community organizer Jaime Ventura, and others from San Mateo, pursued the most active set of projects, usually in collaboration with Juntos. First, they raised enough money in Philadelphia to build a high school in San Mateo Ozolco, which had never had a high school before. Previously, young people wishing to continue past middle school had to travel nearly an hour down the mountain to further their education. Members of Grupo Ozolco also raised funds to fix the town’s main church. Some helped Tequilas Restaurant owner David Suro, a board member of Juntos and Puentes de Salud, organize visits to San Mateo with Lisa Nutter, the wife of Philadelphia’s mayor, in the early 2010s. A Philadelphia-based artist who was originally from Mexico City came on the first trip and, along with students, teachers, and other people from the town, painted murals on the side of the new high school, depicting migrants who had left. Suro’s foundation donated funds to community art and education projects in the town. Grupo Ozolco’s biggest project, though, came with Ventura’s return to live with his mother, sister, niece, and nephew in San Mateo, where he wanted to see if he and others could survive as farmers again.  

As Ventura wrote in an essay on maize, under NAFTA, agriculture had become “incapable of generating either income or jobs for Mexico’s rural residents, and is even less capable of feeding the people.” Indigenous farmers “are condemned to live in the margins of society . . . while their children take advantage of opportunities to migrate.” Indigenous farming methods and seeds passed down for generations were further threatened by multinational corporations’ promotion of “industrialized flour” and genetically engineered seeds, and by “the cultural erosion of our indigenous towns,” due partly to migration.
Ventura and his colleagues in San Mateo formed a cooperative enterprise to revive organic production of indigenous blue corn in the town’s ejido lands. They would toast the kernels over a wood fire on a traditional ceramic platter called a *comal*; take them down the mountain to be mixed with sugar and cinnamon and milled into a flour called *pinole*; and then ship it to Philadelphia. In their vision, in addition to preserving indigenous culture, this could pay at least some farmers in San Mateo enough to survive and perhaps make migration less attractive and necessary for some people. Ironically, they saw this as a way to take advantage of free trade under NAFTA, which was one of the main forces behind their displacement. This was also a chance to capitalize on migrants’ relatively unfavorable position in the US labor market, selling *pinole* to the fancy restaurants that employed them.\(^{177}\)

In the project’s initial years, Peter Bloom, with the freedom of movement afforded by his American passport, traveled back and forth to San Mateo, carrying duffel bags of *pinole* on his return flights to Philadelphia. Ventura, Bloom, and their colleagues began working with product development and certification experts in Mexico. In Philadelphia, Juntos staff and members of Grupo Ozolco tried out different recipes using *pinole*, assisted by Carlos Rojas, who worked as the head pastry chef at a swanky Asian fusion restaurant downtown and whose wife was from San Mateo. They made *pinole* mousse, cheesecake, and muffins, among other desserts, and crafted a marketing plan with visions of creating an import cooperative owned by Grupo Ozolco members. A major grant from Hispanics in Philanthropy and the Packard Foundation supported this project, with a little more than half of the funds going to the work in Mexico.\(^{178}\)

To some observers in the migrant community, this project was just crazy, and in Philadelphia its success remained limited. As one community leader in South Philadelphia opined, “JUNTOS runs this as a transnational project to resolve an economic and migration problem. If it was a cultural project, it would be better . . . but as an [economic] project it doesn’t work.”\(^{179}\) Grupo Ozolco members did import some large batches of *pinole* and sold it to restaurants, cafes, and specialty food shops. But only one member continued to import and sell *pinole*, and at a small scale. Years later, though, “Charro” Sandoval opened a well-reviewed restaurant called Blue Corn in the Italian Market with his siblings, all of whom had worked at upscale restaurants downtown. They sourced *pinole* and unsweetened blue corn flour by the ton from the cooperative led by Ventura in San Mateo, making blue tortillas and huaraches and *pinole* cheesecake and cupcakes staples of their menu.\(^{180}\)

Both Juntos and Hispanics in Philanthropy abandoned their transnational community development work in 2011. The Mexican women who made up
most of Juntos’s board of directors decided to focus the organization’s work more on children growing up in South Philadelphia. People’s mindset had changed from earlier years, in which most imagined they would soon return to Mexico, especially as they had children in Philadelphia. The philanthropy’s leaders were so daunted by the complexity and limited economic returns of the projects they funded that they shut down the entire program supporting this sort of work after just one grant cycle and a few projects. Transnational community development indeed holds many challenges that make it difficult to succeed on traditional economic terms. Moreover, some critics argue that migrants should not be expected to solve their home countries’ economic or political problems.\(^\text{181}\)

But in San Mateo the cooperative flourished, a relatively rare example of economically successful transnational development and rural small enterprise in Mexico, with notable impacts on migration. With forty members by 2010 and more later, their big break came when they gained a contract selling pinole baked goods to the state of Puebla’s indigenous school-meals program. This rough equivalent of the free school-meals program in the United States prioritized sourcing traditional foods from indigenous producers. Slow Food and other international artisan food organizations promoted the cooperative and its products and they shipped blue corn flour to customers in Guatemala and Costa Rica, though this all proved less important for their business than markets in central Mexico.\(^\text{182}\)

Members of the cooperative in San Mateo grew blue corn on ejido and private land, converting some of it back to organic production after years of growing transgenic crops using chemical fertilizers. Farmers earned over 100 percent more for their organic blue corn than they could for other corn harvests. They also fermented pulque, a strong drink made from juice of the maguey cactus cultivated by many farmers in the area. In 2012 they started an annual pulque festival, which attracted thousands of people and became a venue for promoting their corn products, too.\(^\text{183}\) By the end of the decade they ran four lines of business, selling blue and white corn, pulque, and fruits and vegetables.\(^\text{184}\)

At least as important was the fact that the cooperative was based at San Mateo’s new high school. Its members worked with students daily, contributing to environmental, cultural, business, and other areas of education. Migration to the United States slowed for multiple reasons in the 2010s. But young people who left San Mateo were generally older, more educated, and better prepared for life in the United States or Mexico City than Ventura’s generation before them.\(^\text{185}\)

While the transnational activities of Juntos and Grupo Ozolco faded in the 2010s, Mexicans in the Philadelphia region launched other work. In 2014, with
the disappearance of forty-three students in Mexico, Carmen Guerrero “joined international groups dealing with my homeland’s issues of violence, misery and wars,” and femicide. After Trump’s election in 2016, she and her colleagues in Coalición Fortaleza Latina sought out attorneys who specialized in international family law to aid families that had been separated by deportation. Carmen and other advocates from the Philadelphia region became increasingly involved with the Border Angels and other cross-border networks. Members of Coalición Fortaleza Latina collaborated with people who had been deported from Pennsylvania, looking into the well-being of other people in Mexico. They helped people find and assist relatives who disappeared or became stuck without money or family in the border region of northern Mexico, as some cartels began kidnapping and recruiting people who were deported. These constituted key transnational dimensions of an energized, but only in some ways new, sanctuary movement.

What’s New about Sanctuary?

While echoing older visions and practices of sanctuary, the politics, violence, and injustices of the twenty-first century rendered America’s immigrant rights movements even broader projects of solidarity and human rights. After Trump came to power, “nothing changed regarding many hours working within the community” and supporting people, Carmen reflected. But she and her partners in Coalición Fortaleza Latina “started organizing immediately after the election,” expanding their know-your-rights workshops and partnerships with university- and community-based advocates. This included the Shut Down Berks coalition, with Juntos and others, which sought to close the only immigrant family detention center in the Northeast United States, in nearby Berks County (see figure 5.3). They engaged attorneys to help Central Americans and Haitians in the Norristown area keep their Temporary Protected Status. Working with students from Bryn Mawr College, they started a “piggy bank” emergency fund for families of people detained by ICE. They supported people as far away as Kennett Square, almost an hour from Norristown, with clothing drives, donated beds, paying for dental care, and accompanying and interpreting for people in meetings with ICE. They helped churches in Norristown connect with NSM.

The Trump administration ushered in a new, but not entirely new, era of immigration politics and of detention and deportation practice, spurring greater immigrant rights and sanctuary activism. Through his first three years in office, the United States deported fewer immigrants annually than under
Obama. But under Trump, ICE targeted a wider range of people, while under Obama it focused on people with criminal records, even if its raids also swept up others. The Trump administration detained more people in immigration prisons, for longer periods, including many more children and families. Moreover, Trump took steps to dismantle the entire immigration, refugee, and asylum system, as detailed in prior chapters.

Trump’s rhetoric escalated fears of detention and deportation among Mexican and other immigrants. He continually railed against immigrants and refugees in openly xenophobic and racist speeches and social media posts, starting with his campaign launch in June 2015. “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending the best,” he proclaimed. “They’re sending people that have lots of problems and they’re bringing those problems. . . . They’re bringing drugs, they’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.” In the nation’s immi-
migration debates, facts mattered little, including criminologists’ consistent finding that Mexican and other immigrants were less likely to commit crimes than native-born people and played a major part in the decline of violent crime in American cities in recent decades. Trump promised to build a “big, beautiful wall” on the southern border, make Mexico pay for its construction, and form an expanded “deportation force” to expel some three million “illegal aliens.” As in Central American communities profiled in chapter 1, many Mexicans withdrew from public life to some extent during the Trump era. Organizers canceled the San Mateo Carnavalero in May 2017 out of fear that ICE would target the festival to detain and deport people.

Yet well before Trump’s election in 2016, Mexican migration to the United States had slowed and return migration to Mexico was increasing, even if Philadelphia’s Mexican population continued to grow and the second generation expanded significantly. The recession that started in 2008 limited job opportunities in the United States, while opportunities in Mexico improved. By 2018, for the first time Mexicans accounted for fewer than half of all people living illegally in the country and China replaced Mexico as the top sending country of immigrants to the United States. In Philadelphia, people’s practice of inviting family and friends from Mexico to join them diminished. Trump’s rhetoric along with stepped-up border enforcement and detention deterred new migration and made people without legal status more afraid to visit Mexico due to the risks involved in trying get back into the United States.

The legal status of the great majority of recent Mexican immigrants remained an intractable issue, despite repeated proposals in Congress to give people a path to citizenship in the early twenty-first century. The Obama administration’s DACA program granted only tenuous protections to a limited set of people, and courts quickly struck down Obama’s attempt to give similar protections to unauthorized immigrant parents of children who were US citizens. As Peter Bloom noted back in 2008, “the dream” is “just to be legal, to be decriminalized, and to be able to live our lives with dignity.” With the growth of the second generation, “part of the future has happened already . . . it’s all about the kids, what happens with them . . . really determines what happens in the community.” But sanctuary remained relevant, especially for their parents and for millions of other families in Mexican and other communities across the country.

South Philadelphia’s Mexican community was well established by the time of Trump’s election, and in some ways it was more accepted than a decade earlier. Mexican merchants joined the Italian Market’s 9th Street Business Association. Members of the San Mateo Carnavalero participated in the Mummers Parade on New Year’s Day in 2016. In October that year, Geno Vento
removed the “Speak English” sign that his now-deceased father had posted in the window of their cheesesteak shop.\textsuperscript{199} In 2020, during nationwide protests over police violence and racial injustice, city officials painted over the mural of Frank Rizzo in the Italian Market. They vowed to replace it with a mural celebrating the area’s many cultures.\textsuperscript{200}

Philadelphia’s city government increasingly supported immigrant communities, and sanctuary, in the later 2010s. After Mayor Nutter brought about a brief hiatus in the city’s sanctuary policy in the weeks before he left office in January 2016, Mayor Kenney not only revived the policy on his first day, he also expanded the Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs, which Nutter had started. It soon became a permanent city department, coordinating services to newcomer communities and supporting immigrant advocates. In 2018 the city’s new district attorney committed to do all he could to prevent the deportation of immigrants accused of nonviolent crimes.\textsuperscript{201} After successfully defending its sanctuary policy against the Trump administration in court, the next year Mayor Kenney announced a pilot program in which the city would pay for the legal defense of some immigrants in detention. His administration also launched a municipal ID card to ease immigrants’ access to city services.\textsuperscript{202} Still, Pennsylvania’s state capitol remained a hotbed of anti-immigrant legislators, and police in the suburbs continued to collaborate with ICE.\textsuperscript{203}

These local and state dynamics were not all new, but Trump’s rhetoric, his emboldening of anti-immigrant movements, and his administration’s actions inspired a dramatic expansion of immigrant rights and sanctuary movements. Straightaway following his election, thousands of people flocked to the New Sanctuary Movement, including participants in the 1980s Sanctuary Movement who had been unaware or disinterested in joining the new group in its first decade.\textsuperscript{204} More congregations expressed interest than NSM could accommodate.

Compared to the 1980s, NSM advanced a similar but expanded definition of sanctuary. NSM’s geopolitical vision of global solidarity, as well as many of its practices, from legal and material aid to sanctuary in churches, closely resembled those of the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s. So did its foundations in religious faith, for immigrant and receiving community members alike. But it was a broader human rights movement, embracing the most repeated slogan of twenty-first-century immigrant rights advocates, Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel’s observation that “no human being is illegal.”\textsuperscript{205} Most obviously, NSM was not just focused on Central Americans. It was not an antiwar movement, and its national political platform was much less specific than that of its predecessor’s asylum and foreign policy demands. Yet its campaigns for city and state policies were more specific and mattered more to a much greater share of Philadelphia and other cities’ residents.
People in the New Sanctuary Movement in Philadelphia and across the country expressed an intersectional critique of injustice much like, but perhaps even more than, activists did in the 1980s. Especially after the presidential election of 2016, this constituted a response to Trump and his allies’ assault on immigrants, people of color, and LGBTQ rights. Since its start in 2007, NSM had always asserted that Black and brown lives mattered, whether immigrant or native born. This all echoed, but usually went beyond, efforts to link the oppression of Central Americans, Haitians, Chileans, South Africans, and African Americans in the 1980s.

The practices of sanctuary activism took both old and new forms. The New Sanctuary Movement in Philadelphia and other parts of the United States had only occasionally harbored people in churches before 2016. Angela Navarro, who fled violence in Honduras, was the first immigrant on the East Coast to enter sanctuary in the twenty-first century, in NSM member church West Kensington Ministry in North Philadelphia on November 18, 2014. Fifty-eight days later she won her case against deportation in court and left the church. But after Trump’s election this older tradition of sanctuary revived.

By April 2018, at least forty-two people were living in sanctuary congregations in twenty-eight cities around the United States. In Philadelphia, NSM counted thirty member congregations by 2020, including immigrant-led churches in Haitian, Indonesian, and Latin American communities. Several, including the historic African American Church of the Advocate, Germantown Mennonite Church, and the city’s first two sanctuary congregations in the 1980s, Tabernacle United and First United Methodist Church of Germantown, harbored families who had fled violence in Honduras, Jamaica, and Mexico and had orders of deportation against them. The second family from Honduras that entered sanctuary in a Philadelphia church won its appeal to stay in the United States in 2020, as did the family from Jamaica.

Unlike Central Americans in sanctuary in the 1980s, some of these families stayed many months or years inside the church itself, in arguably more public acts of civil disobedience. They held solidarity dinners and other events with no bandanas covering their faces. Their asylum and other legal claims still hinged on the details of their specific experiences, but their cases were not usually tied to broader claims that a much larger group of people from particular countries merited protection, as in the 1980s.

Like sanctuary workers in the 1980s, people in the New Sanctuary Movement pursued a variety of community-based organizing strategies, especially in Philadelphia, but again they supported immigrant communities more broadly. NSM’s campaigns to gain Pennsylvania drivers’ licenses for immigrants without legal status, and to end Philadelphia’s practice of impounding cars driven
by people without licenses, predated Trump’s election. So did its continued
sanctuary city campaigns, as well as opposition to bills in the state legislature
that sought to end sanctuary city policies.\textsuperscript{210} NSM and Juntos also provided ma-
terial assistance to people who were in the country illegally, including those
whose family members were detained. In 2019 NSM supported more than 225
new legal cases for immigrants who were fighting deportation. During the CO-
VID pandemic in 2020, NSM issued “stimulus checks” to 400 families who were
out of work and whose legal status meant they would not receive the stimulus
payments from the government.\textsuperscript{211}

Some of this work highlighted the more urban focus of twenty-first-century
sanctuary activists, their greater promotion not only of sanctuary city poli-
cies but also of mobility, neighborhood safety, and other issues in the city. In
late 2016, NSM launched its Sanctuary in the Streets campaign, which trained
people to disrupt ICE raids when their neighbors were detained. In at least
one case people succeeded in driving away ICE agents attempting a raid. Jun-
tos started a similar Community Resistance Zones program in South Phila-
delphia, held protests blocking ICE vans from exiting the agency’s local office,
and, along with other advocates, protested plans for new “shelters” in the city
and suburbs to detain unaccompanied migrant children.\textsuperscript{212}

NSM, Juntos, and their allies celebrated their victories in convincing city lead-
ers to strengthen sanctuary protections, but they continually pointed out the lim-
its of sanctuary city policies. On the eve of Trump’s inauguration in January 2017,
Juntos issued a statement declaring, “Philadelphia is NOT and has never been a
Sanctuary City.” As long as “ICE continues to deport our loved ones by either get-
ing people on the streets or by raiding their homes,” genuine sanctuary remained
unattainable. “What Philadelphia does do is abide by the fourth amendment in
that it requires ICE to produce a warrant signed by a judge if they want the city
to hold someone” for ICE. “That alone does not make us a Sanctuary City.”\textsuperscript{213}

Indeed, after Trump’s election Mayor Kenney eschewed the term \textit{sanctu-
ary city}. “We do not use that term,” declared his Office of Immigrant Affairs.
Instead, his administration called Philadelphia first a “Fourth Amendment
City” and then a “Welcoming City.”\textsuperscript{214}

The sanctuary city’s limits were painfully obvious to immigrants. In Octo-
ber 2018, reporters publicized what immigrants and activists already knew: “On
two dozen occasions, police, probation officers and even one of Kenney’s top
depu ties have quietly provided tips to ICE about undocumented immigrants who
were charged with crimes. Other forms of information-sharing still continue,” as
well. These were just the two dozen instances documented in court or acknowl-
edged by city officials, which were part of a larger and longer pattern.\textsuperscript{215} After
ICE detained a pregnant Honduran woman who was dropping off her child at a
South Philadelphia elementary school in early 2020, Juntos launched a survey of teachers and administrators that found little awareness that the school district was bound to follow the city’s sanctuary policy. While officially a “sanctuary district,” its leaders did not use that term and it meant little in practice.

Activists around the country made similar critiques of the limits of sanctuary cities, echoing 1980s sanctuary workers but again going further. They argued that American cities could not be true sanctuaries without affordable housing, good schools, safety, and decent wages for all. They demanded an end to discriminatory policing, mass incarceration, and other injustices. Juntos’s leaders repeatedly railed against public school closures and gentrification in South Philadelphia, including the replacement of their own office to make way for a coffee shop. They likened the displacement of immigrants in the neighborhood to their displacement from their home countries, both of which resulted from a neoliberal world order with few protections for working-class people. NSM’s leaders and members decried the erosion of “labor protections . . . and social infrastructure,” including welfare and public housing, with the Trump administration’s “resurgence of white supremacy.” Amid the rallies for racial justice and threats of city budget cuts during the pandemic in 2020, they advocated for antieviction and renter protection policies; funding for parks, homeless services, libraries, public health, arts and culture; and defunding of the police.

For activists in the twenty-first century, sanctuary came to mean something all-encompassing and never-ending. People involved in NSM often repeated, “Sanctuary is not a noun, but a verb.” At the same time it was, as expressed in NSM’s 2017 Statement on Sanctuary, “a vision continuously created through . . . thousands of years of struggle . . . a vision of collective and personal transformation,” of “collective liberation.” All the movement’s “work, campaigns and community building are part of a larger vision to build Sanctuaries within ourselves, our cities, and our world.” Sanctuary was “the umbrella that covers all of us from the storm, and the womb to birth a new world.”

Ultimately, while intensely focused on assisting and protecting the human rights of vulnerable immigrants, sanctuary was not just about newcomers. Rather, as the reverend of one member congregation expressed in her sermon welcoming a Mexican mother and her children into sanctuary in her North Philadelphia church, “We benefit ourselves when we love radically” and “stand for and with each other to fight for justice.” As Carmen Guerrero said to her partners in NSM in 2018, “We’re living a new global dis-order. The human rights situation in our own countries is serious.” In the United States, “we’ve experienced abuses all the time.” For her, “the most important work that” sanctuary activists “can do is one of unification, to accomplish the changes necessary to recognize everyone as one humanity.”