

they would constitute the majority. Latino Californians tended to be younger than the general population, and their birthrate was considerably higher.

Los Angeles County continued to be the center of the state's Hispanic population. But Latino residents were moving in record numbers from the crowded neighborhoods of East Los Angeles into the northern reaches of the San Fernando Valley. The Latino population in the Central Valley was also growing rapidly. More than 40 percent of the residents of Fresno, Merced, and Tulare counties were Latino and Asian. "This valley is the richest multiethnic rural environment in the nation, if not the world," observed Central Valley native Gerald Haslam.

Education remained one of the greatest challenges facing the state's Hispanic population. About 45 percent of Latinos in the workforce had less than a high school education, compared with 8 percent of non-Latinos, and the dropout rate of Latino students was far higher than that of Anglo students. The passage of Proposition 227 in 1998 dismantled the state's bilingual education system, but Latino Californians remained determined to overcome the language barrier. "By the third generation, they have replaced Spanish with English," observed Arturo Vargas of the National Association of Latino Elected Officials. "People are struggling to be part of this society, not be separate from it."

Although a substantial Hispanic middle class was emerging, sustained by more than 650,000 Latino-owned businesses, the median income of Latinos remained far below that of other Californians. Hispanic workers, with limited education and low skill levels, remained concentrated in low-wage jobs. "We are in the workforce," noted Sonia Perez of the National Conference of La Raza. "The problem is, we are moving in and getting stuck." With the lowest rates of computer ownership and Internet access, Latinos also found themselves on the downside of the "digital divide." "We live in a fractured state," one high-tech CEO observed. "People are divided by income, language, and access to information." Researchers at the University of California, San Francisco, confirmed that although Latinos were being employed in record numbers, they were not sharing equally in the state's economic expansion. "There are a lot of indications that we're moving towards a more polarized society," concluded UCSF researcher Laura Trupin, "and the divide continues to be defined by race and ethnicity in the year 2000."

As in earlier decades, illegal immigration continued to contribute to the state's Hispanic population. The California Department of Finance estimated in 2006 that illegal immigration (overwhelmingly Latino) was adding about 73,000 residents to the state's population each year and that one in every 15 Californians was an undocumented alien. Although California continued to draw more illegal immigrants than any other state, the flow also was increasing dramatically elsewhere in the nation. The primary reasons for their coming remained the same as always: economic advancement and family reunification. Higher wage and employment levels were the biggest draw; minimum wages, for example, were ten times higher in California than in Mexico. The presence of undocumented aliens remained important in low-skill occupations, such as farm labor, but they also played critical roles in construction, retail trade, and household services. By the early 2000s, illegal immigrants constituted about 8 percent of the California workforce.

The spectacular growth of California's immigrant population became an intensely debated political issue in the 1990s and early 2000s. Republican governor Pete Wilson's enthusiastic support of Proposition 187, overwhelmingly approved by voters in 1994, ignited a firestorm of opposition from Latinos. (See Chapter 33.) The initiative provoked one of the largest protest demonstrations in the history of Los Angeles and led to an unprecedented level of Latino political activity throughout the state. One million Hispanic Californians registered to vote in the latter half of the 1990s. Whereas Latino voters had represented only 10 percent of the electorate in 1990, they accounted for 16 percent in 2000. Gregory Rodriguez, a researcher at Pepperdine University, credited Pete Wilson and Proposition 187 with finally awakening the "sleeping giant" of Latino political power: "Pete Wilson will be known in the future as the 'father' of Latino California. He's done what thousands of activists could never have done."

Also helping mobilize the Latino community were Spanish-language newspapers such as *La Opinión*. Headed by Monica Lozano, whose grandfather founded the paper in Los Angeles during the 1920s, *La Opinión* had a readership of nearly half a million.



Monica Lozano, president and chief operating officer of Los Angeles-based *La Opinión*, the largest Spanish-language daily newspaper in the United States. (Courtesy of *La Opinión*.)