

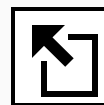
NEWS

What it means for Reading to have the highest percentage of Latinos in Pa.

In Pennsylvania's fourth-largest city, two out of every three residents are Hispanic or Latino, according to the latest census.



Samuel Delacruz, the owner of Double Platinum Barbershop on North Ninth Street in Reading, has been in business for 20 years in the part of the city with the heaviest concentration of Latino residents in Pennsylvania outside of Philadelphia. "I got a lot of





By **ADAM RICHTER** | arichter@readingeagle.com | Reading Eagle and
LISA SCHEID | Reading Eagle

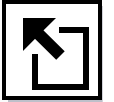
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Roughly 1,100 people live in the 18-acre area of Reading bordered by North 11th Street to the east, Nicolls Street to the west, Spring Street to the north and Windsor Street to the south.

More than 86% of them are Latino.

It's not the most populated block group — an area defined by the U.S. Census Bureau for use in studying population and legislative redistricting — but it's the one with the highest concentration of Latino residents in Pennsylvania outside of Philadelphia.



Within the deeply Latino census tract is diversity, said Tanya Melendez.

“That is Puerto Rican on one side, Mexicans on the other and Dominicans in the middle,” she said.

Melendez, 45, lives in the 18th Ward and coordinates a community garden in Oakbrook.

She grew up in Reading, the daughter of two Puerto Rican teachers who were recruited by the school district in the 1980s to come to Reading to teach the growing community of Spanish-speaking children.

The thought was that Puerto Ricans, because they were United States citizens and Spanish speakers, could be a bridge.

Melendez said at that time there were Spanish-speaking children who came

The migrants came to work in food production and to pick mushrooms. Her father opened Tropical Bakery, which became a thriving bakery on Bingaman Street serving the growing Latino community.

It has continued to grow by leaps and bounds.

Reading Latino Population Map

The 2020 census revealed that the city has the highest percentage of Latinos of any municipality in Pennsylvania: nearly 69%, up from 58% in 2010.

The Census Bureau classifies Hispanic or Latino origin as an ethnicity, not a race.

Samuel Delacruz, 44, came to Reading from New Jersey when he was 13.

Since 2001, he's owned Double Platinum Barber Shop on North Ninth Street.

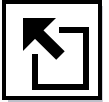
He has seen firsthand the growth of the city's Latino population over the past 20 years. When he started his business, Delacruz said, Reading didn't have many shops like his.

"In 2001, I think I could count all the barbershops in my hand," he said.

Now there are more than 40, he said, "And we're all busy."

Delacruz now lives in Leesport but still has pride in his adopted hometown.

"I got a lot of support from Reading, which made me believe in Reading," he said.



Continuing trends

Reading is not alone in Berks County in experiencing an increase in the Latino population.

Only five of 72 municipalities saw their Latino population either decrease or stay the same over the last decade: New Morgan, Lenhartsville and Bethel, Marion and Upper Bern townships. In more than half the county's municipalities — 37 — the Latino population more than doubled from 2010 to 2020.

Abraham Amoros, the city's managing director, said that among other things, Reading is in the right place.

It's a short drive from New York, Philadelphia and other major cities, and far more affordable than those places. The cost of living also makes it an attractive place for people to raise their families, he said.

"I see the Latino community continue to grow here, simply because of its appeal to many families," he said.

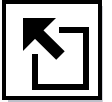
But the city has struggled financially in the recent past. Though it's set to exit Act 47, Pennsylvania's recovery program for financially distressed cities, Reading has been in the program for nearly 10 years.

Over the decades, Delacruz has seen the changes the city has undergone.

Most significant, he said, was that even though employers kept moving out — CNA Insurance, Comcast's retail and bill paying operations, all the stores in the Reading Outlet Center — people kept moving in.

And, kept moving in.

The city moved ahead of Erie in 2020 to become the state's fourth-largest city, with 95,112 people in the latest census. It's the first time Reading had more than 90,000 people since the 1960 census.



LATINO POPULATION GROWTH BY MUNICIPALITY

Reading's population grew by more than 7,000 people from 2010 to 2020.

The growth in Latino residents was more than double that. Non-Latinos now make up less than one-third of city residents.

'Economic empowerment'

The Berks Latino Workforce Development Corporation, an organization that got its seed money from the Wyomissing Foundation, aims to prepare Latino residents in Berks for the labor market.

“The desire for ESL (English as a second language) and high-school equivalency still remains the highest demand,” Garcia said of the agency’s services.

But the Latino workforce is not homogeneous. As with any demographic, skill levels vary. Garcia said that while demand for workers is highest in the manufacturing sector, the health care field is growing in its need as well.

As the city’s demographics continue to shift, Amoros recognizes the need for more educational and economic opportunities for Latinos in Reading.

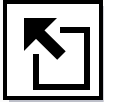
“This is an issue of empowerment — not just political empowerment but economic empowerment as well,” he said.

One pathway to that empowerment, Amoros said, is more homeownership.

As recently as 2019, [Reading was majority renter-occupied](#), with owner-occupied homes making up just over 40% of the city’s housing stock. Amoros would like to get more residents to own rather than rent.

His considerations are more practical than just regarding the American dream: Once Reading exits Act 47, it will no longer be able to charge a tax for commuters who work in Reading and live elsewhere.

The tax revenue will have to come from somewhere, and Amoros says the city needs a population of well-paid residents who own their homes to improve the tax base.



Still have hurdles

Daniel Egusquiza, executive director of [Barrio Alegria](#), said that while the demographic milestone is significant Latinos are still struggling to feel a sense of power and belonging in Reading.

Barrio is a 5-year-old community engagement organization that uses the arts to develop and empower leaders. The goal is to strengthen and empower community members and create a place where the vulnerable community members feel safe.

“Unfortunately some people have to relinquish power so that others can step

Egusquiza noted that he is often asked by non-Latinos to comment about Latino matters and that itself is telling. He believes it shows that there are not enough trusted Latino leaders in the city.

The process of building Latinos' comfort with the institutions that have been predominantly non-Latino and might not be supportive is hard and messy, he said.

For example, Eddie Moran is the city's first Latino mayor, but City Council is two-thirds white.

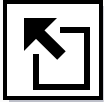
Similarly, Reading's police force has 166 officers, of whom 16% are Latino. The department has said that it is working toward greater diversity.

Marco Silva, 30, lived in Reading as a young child and recently moved back. He lives in the city's Centre Park neighborhood.

In an email interview last week, Silva lamented that Reading's problems overshadow the potential.

“(S)ometimes people focus so much on the hard things that we miss seeing the beauty that’s here,” he said. “And, in turn, development and investment stall and we end up in a vicious cycle: people perceive that nothing good can happen in Reading, so nobody wants to invest in Reading, and therefore we miss out on opportunities to see more good things happen.”

“Everybody has a role to play, Egusquiza added. “How do we do that without making the other ones feel that they’re not wanted or they don’t have power?”



Raising visibility

Some Latinos in Reading are still struggling against old stereotypes and from the lack of systems to integrate them, Melendez said.

Those migrant workers came to do a job and feed their families and kept to themselves, she said.

There was no system to absorb Latinos, and the lack of integration became a sense that they were a problem to be dealt with. There is no sense of

The unique sounds, sights and even foods of the diverse Latino cultures are not on display. A bright spot is the South of Penn community, which is starting to bring out its diversity, she added.

If you talk to somebody and ask them where Baer Park is, they don't know what you are talking about," Melendez said. "If you say 'the Mexican park' they understand because it's about culture. It has soccer fields and a play area their lifestyle tends to be around. You'll see a lot more congregating because it has the things they are used to."

Giving space

Barrio was approached with funds to lead a microlending effort.

The opportunity carried many risks, including training personnel to work with businesses, convincing businesses to participate, and, most importantly, the work of a Latino staff member to be not just accepted but respected in the largely white financial circles of the county.

Egusquiza said education and training are needed within the context of making sure people are "given a space of respect and not treated as a problem to be handled."

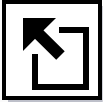
"We, as a community will not grow, or advance, until meaningful change happens," he said. "With the growth in Latino numbers my gut feeling tells me there's going to be more energy, new energy coming. We just need to make sure those people are welcomed in our community, in their new home. Secondly we need make sure there are spaces for them to learn to be educated."

He said what he meant by education is "learning to coexist, learning to thrive together but also learning the responsibility that they carry."

"Community building is messy and it's not linear work. It's not a linear job," Egusquiza said.

Silva said he's wary of overinvestment and the dangers that gentrification brings, but he's optimistic that Reading can have a bright future.

"I want to see people believe in Reading, invest in Reading, and work



Delacruz's clientele is, like much of his neighborhood, Latino.

He considers himself an artist with hair, which is something his customers demand. Pictures on his barber shop's Facebook page show intricate designs carved into the hair on customers' necks.

When he first started, he might see the same clients once every three weeks. Now it's once a week and, in some cases, three times a week.

"It's unacceptable not to be well-groomed," Delacruz said.

Delacruz wants to see everyone in the city work together to make progress, and he's bullish on the city's future.

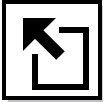
"I think we'll get there, little by little," Delacruz said.

One place you won't see progress? Delacruz's own haircuts.

He doesn't go for the fancy 'dos he gives his customers.

"I'm still old school," he said. "It isn't that important to me."

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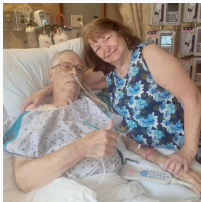
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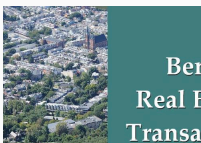
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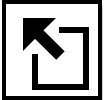
Friday, August 21



Berks
Real Estate
Transactions

Berks County real estate transactions for Aug. 23

Sunday, August 23





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Saturday, August 22



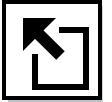
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Friday, August 21



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Saturday, August 22



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