



Researcher profile: Sylvia Pedraza highlights refugee struggle

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This article is part of an ongoing series profiling researchers at the University of Michigan.

Sylvia Pedraza, professor of Sociology and American Culture, doesn't spend her days just giving lectures. She is currently at the forefront of social research on one of the United States' most debated and salient public [issues](#) — refugee migration.

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Much of what inspired Pedraza to teach and research about immigration, social movements and refugees stems from her roots — she immigrated from Cuba to the United States when she was 12 years old.

Throughout her life, Pedraza witnessed what she called a “melting pot of cultures,” both while growing up and while working as a University of Michigan overseas population intern in Malaysia. The Malaysian society was much like what she had seen during her childhood in Cuba, she said, and so both experiences during her early education in the United States validated her personal interest in immigration.

Though Pedraza now teaches multiple classes, ranging from a freshman seminar on Transforming America: Immigrants Then and Now, to an upper-level sociology and American culture class, to a graduate-level seminar, she said she was exposed to so much cultural diversity following her immigration to the United States that she was first unaware of the lack of diversity nationwide.

“It took me a long time to learn about segregation in the United States because my own experience had been so diverse,” Pedraza said. “Amazingly enough, I think that Michigan — despite the low numbers that some people like to underline — if you seek it out, it's there, and it was always there for me.”

Pedraza is currently working on a book project called “Exporting Health: From Cuba to Venezuela to the U.S.,” based on interviews with Cuban doctors who have worked overseas, as well as on the National

Latino Survey, comparing the assimilation of immigrants from various Latino countries in the United States between 1958 and 2005.



A National Impact

Pedraza said the ways immigration and migration form and transform nations can be explored through a number of situations. Throughout her time as a University faculty member, Pedraza has seen the Latino population in the United States increase from 6 percent to about 15 percent — prompting changes such as a Spanish-speaking option on telephone calls, and more consideration of the Latino community nationwide.

Additionally, she said the second largest group of immigrants today, from Asian countries, have also had dramatic effects on American culture. Though she said media outlets often misrepresent immigrants by portraying them as uneducated and undocumented, often times immigrants tend to be well-educated and had professional careers in their home countries. She said these qualities can positively alter the United States' social climate both on an intellectual and economic level.

Collaboration

Pedraza is not alone on campus in her interests in immigration. She also collaborates with the [Washtenaw Refugee Welcome](#), an organization intended to help Syrian refugees resettle in the county.

Emmeline Weinert, WRW co-founder and director of internal communication, works directly with Pedraza and said the organization primarily focuses on supplementing the work of Jewish Family Services — an organization which originally worked to assist the growing population of refugees resettling in the Ann Arbor area and has since expanded to include care for the elderly and career services, according to its [website](#) — and [Samaritas](#), a similar resettlement group.

Weinert said one in 113 people in the world are currently displaced from their homes, indicating a need to expand refugee services. Historically, Weinert said JFS has been resettling about 100 individuals in Washtenaw County each year, but is expected to bring in 300 in the upcoming year, along with Samaritas' estimated resettlement of 100 individuals.

Pedraza's work in part informed creators of a new student organization Michigan Refugee Assistance Program of the need for more refugee aid on campus. LSA junior Maggie Rapai, a member of the executive board for the MRAP, said many student refugees and immigrants have shown interest in the group, and members of the community have reached out to their efforts as well.

Rapai said she and other members of the organization prefer not to refer to the apparent influx in refugee attention as a crisis, but rather an opportunity to continue the work the United States has already been doing for a long time.

“We’ve been resettling refugees for decades,” Rapai said. “And now it’s getting more and more attention, which of course is necessary, but it’s not so much that it’s a crisis because of the people.”

She recounted an instance of working with a refugee family over the summer for a similar organization. In asking one of the family members how they saw their life in the United States, they simply answered, “Better.”

A Broader Political Context

Both Rapai and Pedraza emphasized what they called misconceptions associated with current political discussions surrounding the election and refugees.

“A lot of people tend to make arguments about refugees without actually understanding what it means to be a refugee, which is really frustrating because we’re looking at people and families who are running for their lives and just simply looking for a better tomorrow,” Rapai said.

Weinert said in her opinion, until recently, immigration and refugee assistance was not as politically motivated as it has continued to be in the current presidential campaigns.

“Certain political forces are capitalizing on people’s fear,” Weinert said.

Pedraza said because of this, she thinks it is imperative to stress the contributions immigrants have been able to make to United States culture.

“American culture, I think, is woven out of the threads of all that diversity that immigrants have always brought with them,” Pedraza said.

Specifically, citing the the United States' [decision](#) to allow 100,000 Syrian refugees into the country, she said she believes the influx will have political, social, economic and cultural significance, and that the United States can benefit from it in the same way it has with other refugee waves, as long as nationwide misconceptions become less prevalent.

“I see (refugee migration) as enriching, I see it as positive. That doesn’t mean I don’t see problems,” Pedraza said. “But in general, I don’t see immigration as a threat, and I don’t see immigration as a problem. I see it as the cultural fabric out of which the best of American life is made and has always been made.”

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