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A CASE STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF POPULATION INFLUX ON A SMALL COMMUNITY IN NEBRASKA

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ABSTRACT—This paper discusses the impact of population influx on small communities using the city of Schuyler, NE, as a case study. As a small city of 4,000 some residents, Schuyler experienced a proportionally significant population influx in the past decade largely due to an increase of immigrant population. Unlike large cities, Schuyler has fewer resources to cope with the impact of a drastic population increase on its physical conditions and environment. The population expansion also impacted its previously homogeneous social and cultural environment. Through surveying long-time and newly arrived residents and comparing responses of the two groups, the study revealed similarities

and differences between the two groups in response to questions regarding a variety of issues related to the population influx. The survey investigated residents' perceptions of changes in the physical and social/cultural environment, housing quality and development priorities, and concerns for future development of the city and its housing.

Key Words: case study, immigrants, quality of life, resident survey

Introduction

A considerable number of rural communities throughout the Great Plains states have attempted to reverse their prolonged and steady population decline by attracting food-processing industries. The meatpacking industry (cattle, hogs, and poultry) has been particularly active in relocating from large urban areas to these smaller rural communities, close to the animal-raising areas (Broadway 1995).

Most of the small communities where the meatpacking industries chose to locate lacked the necessary labor supply to meet the demand generated by an industry characterized by low wages, hard work, and high labor turnover (Stull and Broadway 1995). The meatpacking industry has solved its labor supply needs by seeking employees outside the region, including beyond the US border.

The sudden, large influx of immigrants into small communities has generated a number of infrastructure, service, and social challenges (Gouveia and Stull 1995; Broadway 2000), which can be exacerbated by the "outsider phenomenon" that immigrants often experience (Naples 1994; Cantu 1995).

In this paper we report on a study that investigated issues pertinent to the impact of population influx due to migration into small cities and towns. There are two primary reasons that led us to believe that the impact on small cities and towns was quite different from that on large cities.

First, unlike large cities that often have greater resources, small cities and communities have limited resources to cope with pressures of population influx on their housing, infrastructure, and municipal services. Big cities can readily absorb large numbers of immigrants due to their economies of scale and the greater variety of available housing as well as larger social and cultural networks. Secondly, while the social and cultural environment of large cities is often diverse, small cities and towns tend to be more socially, culturally, and ethnically homogeneous. When the new residents are from a different cultural background, their arrival inevitably impacts the social and cultural homogeneity of the community.

This is precisely what has been happening in the city of Schuyler, NE. This east-central Nebraska city is home to a little more than 4,000 residents. Of these, several hundred (estimates vary from a few hundred to as many as 800, or a 20% increase) were new residents in the second half of the 1990s. Some of the new arrivals moved to Schuyler from California, and others directly from their home countries in Latin America, including Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador.

Most of the new residents came for jobs in the city's expanding beef packing plant operated by the Excel Corporation since 1984. While 800 people is not a large population increase for large cities like Los Angeles and New York City, Schuyler experienced noticeable effects on many aspects of city life because of the population influx. On one hand, a wave of newly arrived residents gives new life to the community, especially when many of them come from a culture that is distinctively different from that of long-term residents. On the other hand, a flood of new immigrants poses a variety of challenges to the city.

The most immediate impact of the latest population influx was on the city's housing, especially its affordable housing. The new arrivals needed affordable housing to buy or rent. Municipal services such as schools, public transportation systems, and hospitals also needed to expand in order to accommodate the population growth.

Impacts on its previously homogenous social and cultural environment were also quite obvious. As in other small cities across the United States, residents of Schuyler had been relatively homogenous both culturally and ethnically until the recent population influx. Prior to the influx, the population of Schuyler had been fairly stable since the late 19th century, when Czechs and Germans, among others, moved in to the area. The new population influx of people with distinctively different cultural and ethnic backgrounds exerted an impact on the existing cultural homogeneity and triggered a process of transformation from cultural homogeneity to heterogeneity.

Study Methods

From fall 1995 through spring 1996, a group of architectural and planning researchers at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln conducted a study to learn about the impact of the population influx on the physical environment and quality of lives of Schuyler residents. Of the several objectives for the study, two are relevant to this paper. The first objective was to learn about residents' perceptions of the city and the changes in the physical,

social, and cultural environment as a result of the population influx. Secondly, it sought to identify issues that had direct or indirect implications for city housing and planning.

Our methodology involved three stages. The goal of the first stage was to identify issues related to immigration, population influx, quality of life, housing, city services and infrastructure, and city planning. In order to obtain appropriate information, we conducted meetings with city officials and with two focus groups—one with14 long-time residents and the other with 8 newly arrived residents. Long-time residents were those who had lived in Schuyler for at least 15 years, and newly arrived residents were those who moved into the city within the previous five years. All focus-group and survey information was provided in English and Spanish. In addition to the focus-group meetings, some newspaper articles were collected from the *Schuyler Sun*, the *Lincoln Journal Star* and the *Omaha World-Herald*. The articles provided background information on historical development and the current status of relevant issues.

On the basis of our findings from the first stage, we developed and pretested a questionnaire. Then the research team conducted face-to-face interviews with residents of 85 households over the course of two weekends in February 1996. To inform Schuyler residents of the survey, announcements were made in English and Spanish through posters at St. Augustine's Church and in the following newspapers: *Schuyler Sun*, *Fremont Tribune*, *La Voz Hispana*, and *La Estrella Hispana*. The sample of long-time and newly arrived residents was selected by targeting specific areas of residential neighborhoods. The sampling technique for locating survey respondents was as follows: To sample the newly arrived population—made up mostly of racial-ethnic minorities, principally Hispanics/Latinos—we used the 1990 US Census Block information (U.S. Census Bureau 1992) in combination with the expertise of local city officials and community activists to identify areas (census blocks) containing minority populations (i.e., five or more minority members in the block). We randomly selected and mapped a set of these blocks. To sample primarily long-term residents, we generated a similar set of randomly chosen blocks for the balance of the city.

Starting on a randomly selected corner of the chosen block, and proceeding in a clockwise direction, trained student surveyors interviewed adult volunteer participants. Only one interview per household was taken, with the requirement that the long-time resident be 32 years of age or older. No more than five interviews were conducted on each block. Interviews with the new arrivals took place within pre-identified, randomly chosen

minority blocks made up mostly of multifamily residence clusters (i.e., apartment buildings, mobile home parks, and duplexes, etc.) and some single-family housing neighborhoods. In the case of apartment buildings, surveyors were instructed to seek volunteer participants beginning with the first housing unit on each floor, proceeding to the next unit in the ascending order of apartment numbers. No more than six interviews could be conducted within each selected cluster.

A total of 85 households was surveyed. Of these, 55% were long-time residents and 45% were newly arrived residents. Similarly, 54% of the interviewees were male and 46% were female. Graduate students enrolled in a research methods class in the Department of Community and Regional Planning at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln participated in the process as interviewers.

The survey questionnaire included nearly 100 questions. Most of the questions used a Likert five-point scale. The questions covered issues regarding (1) residents' satisfaction; (2) their perceptions of changes in housing quality, health services, and other civic services such as education, recreation, etc.; (3) stresses they experienced in their daily lives; and (4) their evaluation of physical, social/cultural, and economic environment of the city. Data analysis utilized percentage-frequency distributions cross-tabulated by long-term versus newly arrived residents.

Upon completion of the survey interviews, the research team submitted its analysis of the interview data (frequency distributions and cross-tabulation of long-term vs. recent arrivals), notes of the focus group meetings, newspaper clippings, and a summary report of survey results, *Residents' Perceptions of Housing and the Quality of Life in Schuyler, Nebraska* (Potter et al. 1996), to the City of Schuyler in May 1996.

Survey Results and Discussion

With such an extensive questionnaire (nearly 100 questions), it is clear that focusing attention on some of the more important findings is essential. Seven key considerations were highlighted: (1) satisfaction of the residents, (2) perception of changes, (3) pressure on public municipal services, (4) stress on new arrivals, (5) changes in neighborhoods from homogeneity to heterogeneity, (6) housing priorities, and (7) desired investment in new housing development. With most of these considerations, we will discuss the responses of both newly arrived residents and long-time residents. However, with some considerations, such as perception of changes and stress on

TABLE 1
SATISFACTION WITH LIVES IN SCHUYLER

Happy to live in Schuyler?	Not happy %	Indifferent %	Happy %
Long-time residents	4.2	19.1	72.3
Newly arrived residents	2.8	11.1	86.1
Like to continue to live in Schuyler?	**No %**	**Neutral %**	**Yes %**
Long-time residents	10.6	23.4	63.9
Newly arrived residents	8.3	2.8	88.9

Note: A Likert scale with values from 1 to 5 was used. Not all values are reported.

new arrivals, the we emphasize the resident group that seemed most affected by the issue being discussed.

Satisfaction of the Residents. When asked whether they were happy to live in Schuyler and whether they would like to continue to live in the city, the long-time and newly arrived residents showed some difference. In general, as shown in Table 1, long-time residents were less happy about their lives in the city today and were less likely to continue living there than the newly arrived residents. The survey data revealed that while about 89% of the new arrivals said they would like to continue to live in Schuyler, only about 64% of the long-time residents had the same intent.

Perception of Changes. How did long-time residents perceive the changes that had taken place at various levels of the physical, social, and cultural environment as a result of the population influx? (With regard to this issue, we focused on responses from long-time residents, i.e., those who had a long history of experience to rely on in making the assessment.) To a certain extent, long-time residents perceived changes for the worse in some aspects of city life and environment. Table 2 reveals responses to questions regarding perception of changes over the last 10 years among long-time resident respondents.

TABLE 2
PERCEPTION OF CHANGE OF LONG-TIME RESIDENTS

	Sense of community %	Quality of housing %	Availability of housing %	Crime conditions %	Crowding conditions %	Economic conditions %
Much worse	10.6	8.5	27.7	14.9	46.8	10.6
Somewhat worse	38.3	29.8	42.6	57.4	36.2	29.8
No change	34.0	31.9	6.4	21.3	6.4	31.9
Somewhat better	17.0	19.1	6.4	—	2.1	17.0
Much better	—	2.1	2.1	—	—	2.1

Note: A Likert scale with values from 1 to 5 was used. Not all values are reported.

Among the perceptions of change for the worse, some are consistent with the situation found in the town. For instance, the availability of housing was indeed getting worse when the population increase outpaced new construction of housing in the city. Many long-time residents felt the city was too crowded and that crowding conditions had worsened in the previous 10 years. As indicated in Table 2, for instance, about 47% of the long-time residents rated the crowding conditions being "much worse" and 36% of them rated the condition being "somewhat worse." Undeniably, the feeling was largely valid due to a lack of adequate housing and other city services to accommodate the population influx. These feelings were inevitable for residents of a city of 4,000+ experiencing a population increase of several hundred. Many newly arrived residents had to live with friends or relatives in houses that were, in many cases, already crowded. There were houses that were occupied by as many as 10 to 15 tenants. A lack of affordable housing and perhaps an equally significant factor, a lack of rental information, forced many of the newly arrived residents to follow the same pattern: moving into already crowded apartments with friends or relatives where they had a place to stay and they would receive rental assistance.

Long-time residents also perceived changes for the worse with regard to community relations and crime conditions. As indicated, almost half of the respondents (48.9%) felt that a sense of community was getting much or somewhat worse. Similarly, about three-fourths (72.3%) of the respondents believed crime conditions in the city were much or somewhat worse. The survey data were insufficient to determine if the perceptions were related to

the population influx of immigrants or were simply a result of changes in society and culture in general.

Nonetheless, the perceptions of community and crime may help explain why there were fewer long-time residents than new arrivals who would like to continue to live in Schuyler, as revealed in Table 1. Perception of changes for the worse by many long-time residents certainly does not help sustain the population of the city.

Pressure on Public Municipal Services. The impact of population influx was also experienced in the need for many municipal services provided to its citizens. Three services experienced the greatest pressure: public schools, public transportation, and hospitals. For instance, according to local newspapers, grade school enrollment increased from 594 to 732 in less than 10 years, and more than half of the incoming class of 110 kindergarteners were Hispanic (Ochsner 1996).

A demand for public transportation was heard from the newly arrived residents in our survey. In many families there was only one car per household. When one of the spouses went to work with a car or other means of transportation, the other was often left at home with limited mobility. As a small community, Schuyler offered little, if any, public transportation. This became a problem for the new residents who either could not afford having private transportation and/or were accustomed to public transportation in their home places as well as in large cities they once lived in prior to moving to Schuyler.

The impact of the new population growth on local hospitals and health services was largely felt in terms of their capacity and language assistance. Schuyler, like other small Midwest communities, has few extra resources and can offer very limited language assistance.

Stress on New Arrivals. How did the new arrivals evaluate their new lives in Schuyler? What sources of stress did they experience most? (With this issue, primary attention is focused on the new arrivals because they would be experiencing not only the regular stress of daily life, but also the stress of relocation.) The survey data indicated that new arrivals experienced a higher level of stress in their daily life, compared with long-time residents. The stress tended to come from the following five sources: inadequate income, fear of unemployment, pressure to do better at work, racial discrimination, and struggle for a better house. Only the first two sources of stress were also felt by the long-time residents. While four of the five sources of stress are social and economic in nature, it is interesting to note that the struggle for

TABLE 3
PRIORITIES GIVEN TO TYPES OF NEW HOUSING CONSTRUCTION

	Rental apartments		$40k-59k houses		$60k+ houses		Elderly housing	
	new residents	long-time residents	new residents	long-time residents	new residents	long-time residents	new residents	long-time residents
Least important	8.3	4.3	2.8	10.6	50.0	57.4	30.6	14.9
	11.1	21.3	19.4	21.3	27.8	19.1	33.3	25.5
	25.0	29.8	36.1	23.4	5.6	6.4	15.0	27.7
Most important	47.2	34.0	33.3	31.9	8.3	4.3	2.8	21.3

Note: A Likert scale with values from 1 to 5 was used. Not all values are reported.

better housing by the new arrivals indeed became part of the stress in their lives. The struggle might have been due in part to economic conditions among the new arrivals. But it was also related to the extreme housing shortage. The lack of affordable housing and the high rental cost caused a level of stress in the lives of many new arrivals.

Changes in Neighborhoods from Homogeneity to Heterogeneity. An interesting finding of the study is that both the long-time residents and the new arrivals felt they were getting along with their neighbors even though some of them were of different cultural and social backgrounds. Contrary to common belief, both groups felt that social and cultural differences of people in their neighborhoods were not sources of stress. In short, changes in neighborhood composition, from highly homogeneous to heterogeneous, did not make long-time residents feel especially stressed.

Housing Priorities. In response to questions in the survey regarding priorities for new housing construction in order to accommodate the population influx, the long-time and newly arrived residents showed some difference. Table 3 presents the survey results. (The values in the table are the percentage of persons choosing the response category.)

The statistics clearly indicate that building more rental apartments was considered a high priority by both resident groups. Furthermore, a considerably larger number of the newly arrived residents believed rental apartments were *the* most important (most needed) type of new housing construction. In fact, some people mentioned that because of a shortage of

houses for low-income households, rents went up significantly in recent years. On the other hand, the two groups of residents differed in their views on building more elderly housing accommodations. Perhaps not coincidentally, many of the small communities that have experienced population influx also have an aging population. With a high demand for more rental apartments and elderly housing, there is little doubt that the makeup of housing in Schuyler, like other small cities, will change. No longer will it possess an image of a community largely made up of single-family houses. It will contain the variety of housing types one would see in larger cities.

Desired Investment for New Housing Development. One of the challenges Schuyler faced was that developers of new housing construction were often unwilling to invest due to their concern that the immigrant population was not stable. This concern is legitimate to a certain extent. The perceived instability might come from two factors: immigrants' less stable economic conditions and their lesser commitment to consider Schuyler as their home, since it is so distinctively different from their prior homes in terms of climatic, geographical, social, and cultural conditions. The immigrant population is indeed largely dependent upon job opportunities that are inherently unstable. In the case of Schuyler, the previous owner of the meatpacking plant, Spencer Beef, ceased operation entirely in 1982. This put nearly 1,000 people out of work. Six months later Excel reopened the plant. In this kind of fluctuation, new arrivals are often the first ones to leave. The instability of an immigrant population adds another layer of complexity to the new construction and reconstruction of small cities as they deal with increases in the immigrant population.

As for intentions of the newly arrived residents to stay, our data seemed to indicate that the concern was unwarranted. The data revealed that about 86% of the newly arrived residents felt happy to live in Schuyler, about 89% of them said they would continue to live in the city, and about 92% would recommend the city and their neighborhoods to their friends. Apparently many appreciated the quality of life in Schuyler despite the differences in climatic, geographic, social, and cultural conditions.

Conclusion

The study discovered that, above all, the impact of population influx on the city was felt in many aspects of its physical and cultural environment. And the impact is indeed significant. The population influx has exerted pressures on housing availability in the city, especially affordable housing.

It has also impacted the city's municipal services such as healthcare, education, and transportation. Meanwhile, it has changed the city's social and cultural landscape.

As for similarities and differences in perception among residents, the survey study has the following key findings: (1) both long-time and newly arrived residents tend to appreciate the good quality of life in Schuyler; (2) the newly arrived residents tended to feel more stress and less social support than long-time residents; (3) long-time residents tended to feel conditions were getting worse in terms of the availability of housing, crime conditions and crowding conditions, whereas the newly arrived residents tended to maintain a positive feeling about the sense of community and economic conditions; (4) long-time residents and newly arrived residents differed in their priorities for new housing construction; (5) long-time and newly arrived residents varied in their perceptions of factors contributing to current housing conditions. New arrivals felt that a lack of financial incentives for housing developers was an important contributor to housing conditions. Long-time residents were more likely to feel that city housing policies, a decrease in white-collar jobs, and economic conditions of the population were important contributors to current housing conditions.

Several things seem to be critical for the city to successfully deal with the new population growth. Finding more resources, establishing effective means for communicating with the new arrivals, and embracing the change from homogeneity to heterogeneity are just some of them. Needless to say, tackling the challenges of a population increase of that proportion (a 20% increase) requires tremendous resources. It is not realistic for small cities like Schuyler to undertake the task alone. Therefore, a framework of joint effort between public and private sectors of society is necessary. In the case of Schuyler, the city and Excel need to continue working together to implement strategic plans for dealing with the population influx. This will help bring financial stability for the new arrivals that will, in turn, help convince private housing investors to construct new housing. As revealed in this study, a lack of confidence in the financial stability of the new arrivals was one of the issues that concerned housing investors.

Establishing effective means for communicating with new arrivals seems to be another strategy to help address some problems facing new arrivals. Partly due to the language barrier, the new arrivals were often not aware of some housing assistance policies and programs available to them. The Affordable Housing Program of the Federal Home Loan Bank, various programs of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, and Habitat for Humanity are some of them.

The city of Schuyler is changing from a community of homogeneity to one of heterogeneity both in terms of its culture and its physical environment. The changes are not new to Nebraska or Schuyler. In the last century, Nebraska has been a place where immigrants of German, Czech, Irish, and other backgrounds came to settle. Embracing a change from homogeneity to heterogeneity is another important issue. While ethnic tensions were not unheard of, and acceptance of the two resident groups of each other was not without hesitation in Schuyler, its citizens have begun to realize that a better way to deal with the recent population influx is what their ancestors did in the last century. That was to work together to establish a community of differences. A heterogeneous community may make the city even more livable in the future.

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