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# Demographic Characteristics and Concerns of New Arrivals to Rural Nebraska

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## DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS AND CONCERNS OF NEW ARRIVALS TO RURAL NEBRASKA

*James J. Potter*  
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*Immigration is often thought of as a problem primarily for large metropolitan areas. However, much of the recent literature dealing with the meat processing industry focuses on the migration it generates towards small, rural towns in the American Midwest. The prior studies frequently use a qualitative method. The primary goal of this study was to explore the characteristics of new arrivals to two Midwestern towns (Schuyler and Crete, Nebraska). The basic method used for developing the inventory of demographic characteristics and concerns was analyzing data from two quantitative studies previously conducted by the authors. Identical questions were selected from each study in order to create a uniform data set. Selected questions include length of residence, number of persons in the household, age, sex, nationality, level of education, occupation, and place of origin, as well as inadequacy of income, job satisfaction, pressure to do better at work, racial discrimination, and struggle for a better house. This study presents a description of the demographic characteristics and concerns of the recent arrivals to the two communities. The results could have implications for other similar communities.*

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## INTRODUCTION

As economic globalization increases, agricultural processors locate plants in rural areas, a source of raw materials and lower labor costs. Towns like Crete and Schuyler, Nebraska, are such towns. The communities in which these plants have located have benefited economically from an increase in the number of jobs available. However, the location of these plants has also brought about shortages of affordable housing and strained education, healthcare, and welfare services.

To better understand the needs and perceptions of residents of rural Midwestern towns, a multidisciplinary research team from the College of Architecture at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln conducted studies focusing on the characteristics and concerns of new arrivals to Crete and Schuyler, Nebraska. The intention was to better understand the people who have recently migrated into these communities. The data analyzed for this study are the product of two studies conducted by James Potter, Rodrigo Cantarero, and colleagues: *Residents' Perceptions of Housing and the Quality of Life in Schuyler, Nebraska* (1996) and *Perceptions of the Quality of Life Among Residents of Crete, Nebraska* (2001).

Both of the studies focused on understanding how various environmental factors affect the quality of life for the newly arrived residents (less than five years in the community) and longtime residents (over 15 years in the community) of these small, rural communities in eastern Nebraska (Crete, population 6,028; Schuyler, population 4,052). The primary focus of the studies was the relationship between housing conditions and other quality of life factors. For the purpose of these studies, quality of life factors were defined as physical environment, social and cultural aspects, economic circumstances, and public services. Although the two studies dealt with new arrivals and longtime residents as well as a wide range of quality of life issues, this paper will concentrate on the issues relating to the demographic characteristics and concerns of new arrivals.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Immigration is often thought of as a problem primarily for large metropolitan areas. However, much of the recent literature dealing with the meat processing industry focuses on the migration it generates towards small, rural towns in the American Midwest (Aponte, 1997; Bodvarsson and Van den Berg, 2003; Dalla, *et al.*, 2002; Fink, 1998; Fults, 1999; Gouveia and Stull, 1997; Henness, 2002). Scholars and other professionals are interested in a variety of issues that these situations offer. Towns such as Lexington, Nebraska; Storm Lake, Iowa; and Garden City, Kansas, have been studied for the effect that immigration has had on the community and the tensions that have become common place between the large corporate meat processors and the communities in which they reside (Henness, 2002). When a community rapidly becomes more diverse, this tension between the community and the corporate meat processors has the potential to become an adversarial relationship.

Beginning in the 1960s, the meat processing industry started locating their plants in small, rural towns in an attempt to bring their processing activities closer to the supply of the raw materials (Henness, 2002). Corporate processing giants like IBP, Excel Corporation, and Con-Agra's Monfort, Inc. are increasingly located in rural areas. This ruralization of the industry has had a dual effect: (1) the industry became decentralized, with a greater number of plants located further away from their principle markets; and (2) the communities that house these large corporate processors experienced sudden demographic diversification.

The communities experience this diversification because the meat processing industry utilizes mainly unskilled labor. The work required in these processing facilities is labor intensive, unpleasant, and low paying, which is work that many local residents are not interested in having. Thus, the positions are filled by recently arrived laborers (Dalla, *et al.*, 2002). These newly arrived laborers are primarily composed of ethnic minorities.

Another theme in the literature related to the demographic characteristics of these new arrivals is the number of dramatic social, economic, and cultural changes that the small communities experience due to the large influx of laborers and their families from many parts of the world. Population figures for the rural Midwest show the greatest number of newcomers in the last two decades have come from Mexico and Central America. In fact, Latinos accounted for over half of the total population growth (Aponte, 1997).

Economically, United States and Midwestern population data suggest that Latinos in the U.S. sustained a significant decrease in real income and a corresponding increase in poverty over the decade of 1980-1990, while during the same time, whites experienced only moderate economic decline, and the region's blacks sustained a devastating blow (Aponte, 1997). Because production jobs in meat processing plants are low on the pay scale, the number of families living on low incomes has grown relative to the total number of families. Although this could potentially result in a decrease in per capita income in the community and thus have a negative impact on the community's economy and quality of life (Hennes, 2002), on the other hand, a recent study indicates a positive effect on local wages and employment (Bodvarsson and Van den Berg, 2003).

The recent arrivals may experience a lack of upward mobility in employment. They come to these communities with a bundle of energy and a solid work ethic. A few eventually are able to move out of meat processing to take other jobs or start their own businesses. However, in most cases, meat processing represents the only employment possibility for these low skilled laborers in these small communities (Gouveia and Stull, 1997).

Economic influences of meat processing go beyond the effects upon the recent arrivals. The towns themselves sustain new and additional costs. Local governments often extend lucrative incentives to processors to move in, above and beyond the costs of necessary infrastructure. The local government of Finney County, Kansas, for example, gave 10 years of property tax relief totaling \$3.5 million and \$100 million in industrial revenue bonds to attract IBP (Hennes, 2002).

Social and cultural issues are apparent in the literature. Social dilemmas often arise from conflict with the historical and established social pattern of these small town societies. The agrarian vision of a society of small landowners denied class division, an ideal that persists to shape the modern image of rural life (Fink, 1998). Nevertheless, social and cultural differences have created a separation between the recent arrivals and the longtime residents. This social/cultural separation is a product of unpreparedness. A rapid expansion of Latinos in the labor force within dominantly Anglo communities catches the latter by surprise. Neither meat processing plants nor communities fully anticipated the effects of this shift or planned for the successful integration of these new workers and their families into the community (North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, 1999).

Fortunately, these preparation shortcomings have been noticed and actions are being taken in various towns to better prepare the communities and long term citizens for the new arrivals who will work in the processing plants. A few communities have anticipated these changes and have taken a proactive approach. For instance, in Lexington, Nebraska, community leaders began preparation prior to the processing plant's arrival by developing a community impact study team. Rogers, Arkansas (although further south than the majority of studied meat processing plants) also adopted this approach, assembling a multicultural forum to answer questions and concerns while covering emerging issues (Fults, 1999).

Policy steps have also been taken to better prepare communities. Nebraska Lieutenant Governor Dave Maurstad, in response to poor working conditions for laborers and their employers, has suggested that processing plants establish a "Community Liaison" program within their organization. The program is to help orient the employees and the community as a whole (Maurstad, 2000). Some of the literature does suggest that communities are adopting strategies of integration and inclusion opposed to isolation or marginalization (Fults, 1999; Hennes, 2002; Maurstad, 2000).

Many impacts and responses discussed in the literature (Dalla, *et al.*, 2002) focus on the services within the communities that become strained with the new arrivals. As discussed earlier, social and cultural differences inhibit societal inclusion. These differences also complicate access to basic services. Education, healthcare, and welfare service providers have had to incorporate language and/or multicultural training for staff, hire new bilingual staff, or contract with translators (*ibid.*). This in turn inflates community concerns that new arrivals are compromising the quality of their services, as well as the quality of schools and education (*ibid.*).

In summary, the literature identifies a series of issues between newly arrived laborers and the communities to which they migrate. Following the processing plant's arrival, communities are often caught in a reactionary mode to new arrival issues, experiencing additional burdens from the growing populations (Heness, 2002). As the population of new arrivals increases, it is necessary for the community to recognize the changing demographic situation and take action to accommodate and adjust to the quickly diversifying community.

## THE QUESTIONS AT ISSUE

The primary goal of this study is to explore the demographic characteristics and concerns of the new arrivals to Crete and Schuyler. The study seeks to answer the following questions:

- What are the demographic characteristics of the new arrivals?
- What are the key concerns of the new arrivals?
- What are the similarities and/or differences that exist between the new arrivals in Crete and Schuyler, Nebraska?
- How do the demographic characteristics of the new arrivals differ from Nebraska data?

## METHOD AND PROCEDURE

As mentioned in the introduction, the data analyzed here are the product of two studies. Each of the studies employed similar methods and procedures and each consisted of three phases.

The goal of phase one was to gather information from meetings, focus groups, a literature review, U.S. Census data, and relevant newspaper articles. Except for the focus groups, the other data provided the team with a better picture of the historical forces that have shaped current conditions in Crete and Schuyler, as well as the larger Midwest area. The focus groups (one of longtime residents and one of recent arrivals) were a means of identifying and understanding community residents' concerns regarding housing and quality of life issues. The focus group sessions were structured around key domains gleaned from the literature: housing, neighborhood, services, changes, improvements, and quality of life. The data from the focus groups were coded, organized into appropriate categories, and developed based on the residents' responses to the resulting analysis survey questions.

The goal of phase two was to survey longtime (more than 15 years) and newly arrived residents (less than five years) regarding their perceptions of quality of life issues — i.e., physical, social/cultural, economic, and services issues. The survey was pretested, and some final revisions were made so there was a shared meaning of language. Both native speakers and bilingual (Spanish-speaking) interviewers were utilized for the data collection.

The sample design for Crete was a Simple Random Sample (SRS) of Census 2000 blocks and a SRS of Census 2000. The design for Schuyler was the same, except Census 1990 data were used. The sample design included five or more racial/ethnic minorities (to ensure an adequate number of minorities were reported in the sample). All households in the chosen blocks were contacted, and surveys were randomly assigned to an eligible member. A total of 100 surveys were obtained in Crete and 85 surveys in Schuyler, attempting to obtain equal amounts of long-term and newly arrived residents.

TABLE 1. Demographic characteristics of new arrivals and comparison to state of Nebraska.

| Demographics         | Schuyler | Crete | Schuyler+ Crete | Nebraska      |
|----------------------|----------|-------|-----------------|---------------|
| Female               | 26%      | 57%   | 48%             | 51%           |
| Age (median)         | 30       | 26    | 28              | 35            |
| Married              | 64%      | 42%   | 51%             | 59%           |
| High school grad.    | 39%      | 37%   | 37%             | 80%           |
| < \$20,000           | 21%      | 20%   | 20%             | 14%           |
| < \$30,000           | 50%      | 39%   | 45%             | 22%           |
| < 1 year in town     | 47%      | 34%   | 39%             | Not available |
| In residence < 1 yr. | 61%      | 55%   | 57%             | Not available |
| Household size of 4+ | 59%      | 60%   | 60%             | 23%           |
| Household w/children | 100%     | 41%   | 58%             | 33%           |
| 2-3 Bedrooms         | 51%      | 78%   | 69%             | 65%           |
| Hispanic/Latino      | 67%      | 59%   | 62%             | 6%            |
| Foreign-born         | 61%      | 57%   | 58%             | 4%            |
| In U.S. = 5 years    | 60%      | 25%   | 41%             | 37%           |

The respondents were very cooperative, and the response rate was 96%. The questionnaire utilized a Likert scale of 1 (agree) to 5 (disagree) to determine level of concern regarding housing and quality of life issues. The residents were specifically asked if particular issues were a source of stress for them. The questions were phrased as follows: (1) My level of income is a source of stress; (2) Racial discrimination is a source of stress; (3) My job (or lack of job) is a source of stress; (4) Lack of transportation is a source of stress; (5) Social or cultural differences of people in the community are a source of stress; (6) I feel pressure to do better, advance, or succeed; and (7) Feeling isolated is a source of stress.

The goal of phase three was to analyze the survey results and disseminate the information. SPSS was used for the data analysis. In the final phase, the research team used the survey results and field notes taken during resident survey contacts to generate recommendations for enhancing the quality of life in Crete and Schuyler.

## ANALYSIS

Demographic information was sought from the aggregate data of both Crete and Schuyler for the new arrivals. Identical questions were selected from each study in order to create a uniform data set. Selected questions included length of residence, number of persons in the household, age, sex, nationality, level of education, occupation, and place of origin. Frequency distributions of questions on inadequacy of income, job satisfaction, pressure to do better at work, racial discrimination, and struggle for a better house were calculated.

## FINDINGS

In this section, results of the demographic data analysis, as well as the key concerns of residents, are presented. The information represents the cumulative total of 53 respondents from Crete and 36 from Schuyler who were new arrivals. Results for the total respondents and individual communities are presented. It should be noted that the data comprise a small sample from two relatively small, rural communities in Nebraska, and it would be unwise to generalize beyond this. Nonetheless, it is readily apparent from the survey results that newly arrived residents from both Crete and Schuyler share many demographic characteristics and key concerns.

### *Gender*

The total data set presents a fairly even gender distribution with 51.7% of the respondents being male and 48.3% being female. It should be noted that while the cumulative sum of the two towns repre-

sents a fairly equal response between men and women, a slight majority of Crete respondents were female (56.6%), and the majority in Schuyler were male (63.9%).

### *Age*

The respondents were fairly youthful, with 78.7% younger than 40 years of age. The residents of Crete were fairly young with a median age of 26 years old, which is younger than the state and national average of 35 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000), whereas the new arrivals to Schuyler were slightly older with an average age of 30, which is much closer to the state and national average.

### *Marital Status*

The combined data show that half (50.6%) of the respondents are married. With less than half of the population married (41.5%), the newly arrived Crete residents contrast with the 58.5% of Nebraska residents who are married (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). On the other hand, nearly two-thirds (63.9%) of the newly arrived Schuyler residents are married.

### *Highest Level (Grade) of Formal Education*

The new arrivals to Crete were widely varying in educational attainment with 21.2% not having completed high school and 36.5% having completed high school. The Schuyler group was also relatively low in educational attainment with 41.7% not having completed high school and 38.9% having completed high school. The educational level of the new arrivals from both communities is significantly lower than the 79.6% of Nebraska's total population who have graduated high school (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

### *Income of Household*

It should be noted that the two studies were done five years apart, thus the reporting of household income levels will be affected by inflation. The household income level of the combined respondents shows that 20% make less than \$20,000 and 44.7% less than \$30,000 per year. Although some differences exist, the household income levels of each community are somewhat similar. In Crete, 19.5% of the individuals reported household incomes of less than \$20,000, and 39% reported less than \$30,000 per year (the national poverty level was \$18,392 for four-person average households according to the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau). In Schuyler, 20.5% of individuals reported annual household incomes of less than \$20,000 per year (14.5% for the state), and 50% reported less than \$30,000 (21.9% for the state).

### *Length of Stay in Crete/Schuyler*

All participants in this study had been residents of Crete or Schuyler for five years or less (by definition of new arrivals). Slightly over 39% of the respondents had resided in the communities for one year or less. The Crete respondents are very new to the community with 34.1% belonging to the community for less than one year and 60.5% less than three years. The Schuyler respondents were even more recently arrived to the community with 47.3% living in the community for less than one year and 75.1% less than three years.

### *Length of Stay in Current Residence*

The responses to this inquiry show that a majority of new arrivals had lived in their current residence for a relatively short period of time with 57.2% having resided in their current home for less than one year. Both communities had similar lengths of stay with 54.9% of Crete respondents and 61.3% of Schuyler respondents having lived in their current homes for less than one year. Considering this result with the previous question suggests that newly arrived immigrants seem to change place of residency often.

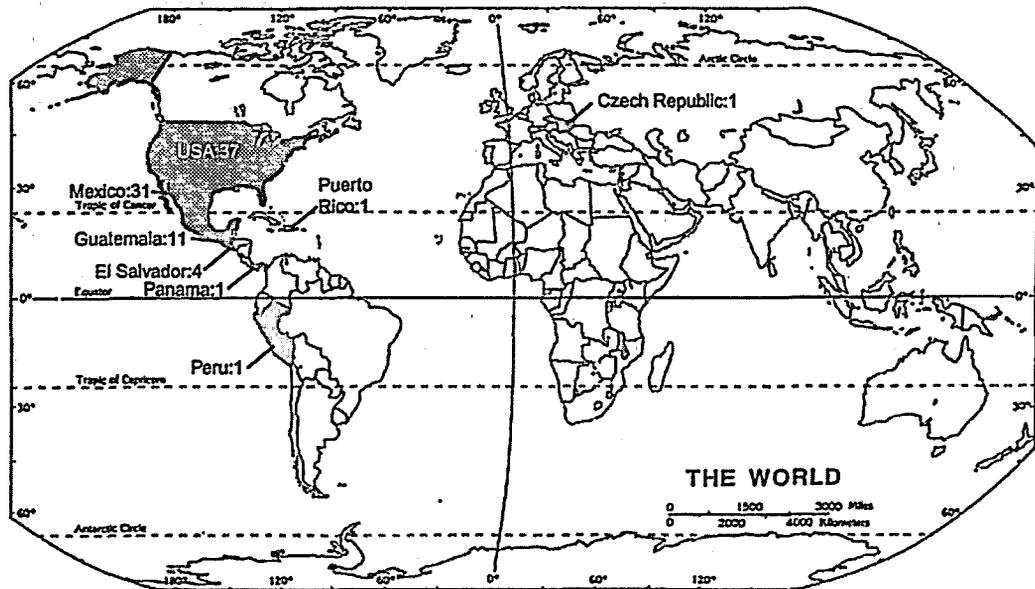


FIGURE 1. Respondent birth locations (numbers indicate number of respondents born in each country).

### *Number of People in Household*

The data suggest that the number of people living in a residence is fairly high with 59.5% of homes having four people or more (compared to 23.4% for the state). The numbers are fairly consistent in both communities. With an average of four persons per household and 60.3% living in homes with four or more people, the new arrivals to Crete households are considerably larger than the Nebraska average of 2.5 persons per household (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The Schuyler group are also members of relatively large households (compared to Nebraska) and rather similar to Crete with 58.5% living in households with four or more people.

### *Number of People in Household Below Age 18*

Overall, 57.9% of households had children (persons under 18) and 37.1% of homes had two or more persons under age 18 in the household. The Crete respondents had fewer children; only 41% having household members under age 18 (25% had two or more), versus Schuyler, which had a 100% presence of children in the home (67.5% had two or more). In contrast, 32.7% of Nebraska households contain children.

### *Number of Rooms Designed as Bedrooms*

The majority of homes within the Crete and Schuyler sample report had two to three bedrooms (68.5%). Interestingly, the number of rooms designed as bedrooms within each community differs greatly. The Schuyler residents show a wider range of bedrooms than in Crete. Schuyler residents reported 14.5% one bedroom, 26.5% two bedrooms, 37.3% three bedrooms, and 13.3% four bedrooms or more; while 78% of Crete's homes had either two or three rooms designed as bedrooms. For the state, 65% of homes have two or three bedrooms.



FIGURE 2. Interstate immigration to Nebraska (numbers indicate number of respondents from each state).

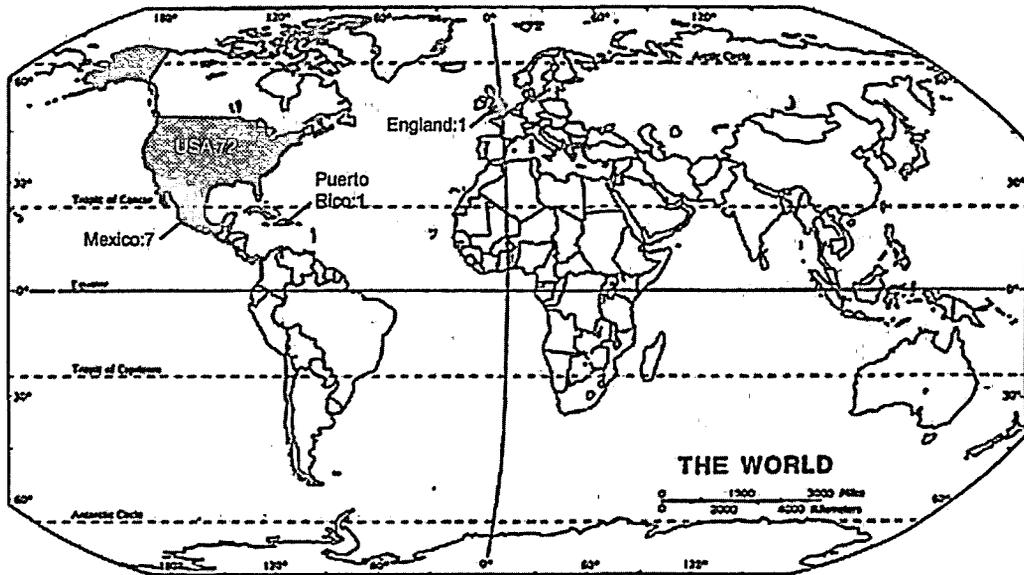


FIGURE 3. International immigration to Nebraska (numbers indicate number of respondents from each nation).

### ***Ethnicity***

The majority of each community's newly arrived residents consider themselves to be of Hispanic or Latino descent. While Nebraska as a whole reports 5.5% of its population being Hispanic or Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000), 61.8% of the respondents consider themselves to be Latino — 58.5% in Crete and 66.7% in Schuyler. Other research findings reinforce the preponderance of Hispanic and Latino workers in Schuyler — i.e., Dalla, *et al.* (2002) note that 70% of their meat processing workers are Latino.

### ***Racial Background***

In the combined sample, 41.6% consider themselves White, 1.1% Black, and 57.3% of some other race. The responses are relatively similar within both communities with "Other" being the most common selection, followed by White.

### ***Country of Birth***

Newly arrived residents report origins from all over the world, but certain patterns emerge. The combined data show that the U.S. and Mexico are the most common places of birth with 41.6% and 34.8% respectively. Central American countries also are common places of origin with 18% originating in places such as Guatemala and El Salvador. More specifically, the newly arrived to Crete were mostly born in the U.S. (43.4%) and Mexico (34%). Likewise, the new arrivals to Schuyler were mostly born in the U.S. (38.9%) and Mexico (36.1%). However, there is also a strong representation of Central American natives (16.7%). See Figure 1. The Census 2000 reports 4.4% of Nebraska's population being non-native foreign born.

### ***If Not Born in the United States, Length of Stay in the United States***

Of the respondents that were not born in the U.S. (44 total), the majority (59%) had been in the U.S. for more than five years (63.2% for the state). Crete foreign-born respondents have a slightly longer average duration in the U.S. than those in Schuyler with 25% having been here for five or fewer years (54.2% had been here for less than 10 years), while 60% of Schuyler foreign-born respondents had been living in the U.S. for five or fewer years (80% had been here for less than 10 years).

### ***Location of Residence (State) Before Moving to Crete/Schuyler***

Before moving to Crete and Schuyler, the respondents came from a variety of locations. Although respondents emigrated from 17 states, 85.5% of the respondents came from Nebraska and states to the south and west of Nebraska. The two largest sources of newly arrived residents in Crete and Schuyler came from other locations within Nebraska (32.6%) and California (19.1%). The data from each community resemble the combined data. The newly arrived residents came from either the American Southwest (California, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, or Colorado) (Crete — 24.6% and Schuyler — 36.1%) or other communities within Nebraska (Crete — 34% and Schuyler — 30.6%) prior to moving to the community. See Figure 2.

### ***Location of Residence (Country) Before Moving to Crete/Schuyler***

By zooming out one more step and looking at the data in a macro scale, the information shows that although a majority of newly arrived residents previously lived in other areas of the U.S. (80.9%), there is an international influence on Crete and Schuyler with 7.8% of respondents previously living in Mexico and another 2.2% having lived in Europe or the Caribbean. The data from both Crete and Schuyler individually seem to mimic the combined total with 75.5% and 88.9%, respectively, having previously lived in the U.S. However, Crete's international influence is largely of Mexican descent while Schuyler has both English and Puerto Rican residents. See Figure 3.

## CONCERNS OF NEW ARRIVALS

There are a number of important concerns, but new arrivals and residents of Crete identified stress as a main source of concern. The result of the Cronbach's alpha test of reliability for the stress items listed above in the methods section is 0.759. It was found that:

- Income level was a source of stress for 42% of the respondents.
- 42% agreed that racial discrimination is a source of stress.
- 41% said their job (or lack of job) is a source of stress.
- Lack of transportation is a source of stress for 34% of the newly arrived residents.
- Social or cultural differences of people in the community are a source of stress for 26% of them.
- About two-thirds of the newly arrived residents (65%) agreed they felt pressure to do better, advance, or succeed.
- Finally, 31% of them agreed that feeling isolated is a source of stress.

The data indicate that the new arrivals to Schuyler also experienced similar stress in their daily lives due to inadequate income, fear of unemployment, pressure to do better at work, racial discrimination, and struggle for a better house.

Besides stress, another source of concern was the pressure on public and municipal services, which was exacerbated by the population influx. The pressure was especially experienced in the need for public schools, public transportation, and hospitals. The data clearly indicate that building more rental apartments was considered by the new arrivals as being of high, if not the most important, priority. However, a major challenge Schuyler faced regarding new housing construction was that developers were often unwilling to invest due to a concern that the immigrant population was not stable.

The perceived instability might come from two factors: (1) immigrants' less stable economic conditions and (2) their possible lesser commitment to Schuyler as their home. As for the economic instability, indeed, the immigrant population is highly dependent upon job opportunities that can be unstable. And as for the intentions of the newly arrived residents to stay, the data seem to indicate that the concern might be unwarranted. The data reveal 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 town, and about 92% of them would recommend the town and their neighborhoods to their friends.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it is readily apparent from the survey results that newly arrived residents in both Crete and Schuyler share many demographic characteristics and key concerns. They are relatively young individuals that have lived in the communities for less than two years, changing residences often within that time. They seem to have a lower educational attainment than the average of Nebraska and somewhat fewer are married than the rest of the state. Conversely, new arrivals' household sizes and family sizes seem to be larger than average. A majority of these dominantly Latino/Hispanic individuals have household incomes that border on the poverty level. Ethnically diverse, most new arrivals were not born in the U.S., although a majority lived elsewhere in the U.S. prior to moving to Crete or Schuyler.

A few of the things that concern them are (1) inadequate income, (2) fear of unemployment, (3) pressure to do better at work, (4) racial discrimination, and (5) struggle for a better house. Nonetheless, the recent arrivals appreciate the good quality of life in their new communities. They can rely on friends for support in times of need, they would recommend their immediate neighborhood to a friend, and they feel there is a "sense of community" and cooperation among neighbors. These are all attributes of a healthy community.

As a follow-up to this study, it would be appropriate to look at other communities in the Midwest experiencing a similar influx of immigrants due to the decentralization of the meat processing industries. It would be worthwhile to assess whether the characteristics and concerns of the immigrants in Crete and Schuyler are more widespread.

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## AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

James J. Potter is a Professor of Architecture at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He has been involved in environmental design research, presenting papers at professional conferences, and publishing research that establish his continuing interest in how people perceive, use, and are affected by their environment. He has pursued his desire to bridge the gap between the teachings of architecture, the development of community based projects, and the conceptualization and execution of relevant research in environmental design. His key research goal has been to expand our knowledge about the impact of physical and social change, especially rapid development, upon people's quality of life. A secondary goal has been to better understand the role the residential environment plays in everyone's daily life. The ultimate purpose of the research is the development of strategies to ameliorate the negative effects of rapid change upon people's well being.

Rodrigo Cantarero is an Assistant Professor in the Community and Regional Planning program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where he teaches research methods in planning. He is interested in minority health, health and the built environment, and immigration's effect on small towns in the Great Plains. He is currently doing research on neighborhood safety in Lincoln, Nebraska.

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