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Predictors of Earnings for Mexican Americans in the Midwest

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EXAMINING STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES OF RAPID RURAL IMMIGRATION

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ABSTRACT—Intensive, in-depth interviews were conducted with 45 non-Hispanic white residents of three rural Nebraska meatpacking communities. The purpose of the investigation was to document (1) perceptions of community change; (2) community-wide benefits of a new Latino population; and (3) strategies for strengthening multi-ethnic rural communities. Data were analyzed using Thematic Analyses (Aronson 1994). Application of the findings, for strengthening rural communities, is discussed.

Key Words: immigrants, Latino, meatpacking, Midwest, rural

Introduction

The composition of rural populations is changing at a remarkable rate largely due to immigration (movement into a country in which one is not a native) and migration (movement within a country). The population growth of US Hispanics in the Midwest and Great Plains was dramatic during the 1990s. The Hispanic population in Nebraska, for example, increased by 165% between 1990 and 2000, minimizing the loss of the state's population over the last decade. Such significant population shifts can transform the dynamics of communities. A question that many ask, however, is what contributes to these dramatic demographic shifts in areas of our nation that were previously underrepresented by US Hispanics? The simple answer to this question is: industry and employment. Meatpacking, for example, requires little training or English-language skills, and has been found to be a primary magnet attracting immigrants to the midwestern states (Dalla and Baugher 2001). Moreover, packing plants offer year-round labor; immigrants entering rural midwestern communities are beginning to stay (Skaggs 1986; Broadway 2000).

Such sweeping demographic changes raise a host of questions for educators, mental-health workers, government, and businesses alike, with respect to the challenges and opportunities these changes present. This investigation was intended to examine long-term, non-Hispanic white residents' perceptions of community change, given large-scale influx of immigrant laborers to the meatpacking industry. A second goal was to examine residents' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of sweeping demographic and community changes. Finally, effective strategies for responding to rapid demographic change resulting in multicultural communities were sought.

Meat-Processing (Meatpacking)

The dominant manufacturer in the midwestern states is the meatpacking industry (Rhoads 1992). Meat-processing is a \$95 billion per year business. In the 1990s, as manufacturing industries moved into rural communities, rural job growth was faster than urban job growth. Between 1989 and 1994, rural counties added a net of 167,000 manufacturing jobs, while urban counties lost 1.2 million manufacturing jobs (Bjerklie 1995).

Necessity for Immigrant Labor. Immigrant labor is vital to the expansion and sustainability of the packing industry. Massey et al. (2002) describe

several factors that necessitate immigrant labor in developed countries. First, they refer to *structural inflation*, the process by which wages are correlated with job status and prestige. To increase wages to attract entry-level laborers (e.g., those working on the kill floor) would result in pressure to raise wages at every level of the job hierarchy (i.e., line supervisors, general foremen, floor supervisors, and plant managers). "The cost of raising wages to attract entry-level workers is typically more than the cost of those workers' wages alone," thus providing employers with "a strong incentive to seek easier and cheaper solutions, such as the importation of immigrants" (16).

Massey et al. (2002) contend that the *social constraints on motivation* further necessitate the work of immigrant laborers. They argue that individuals work not only for income but for social status. Yet entry-level positions, such as working the "kill floor," are not associated with social status, and there is little room for upward mobility. Thus, motivational problems are inevitable for workers on the bottom of the job hierarchy. Employers need workers who are motivated by income. Massey et al. (2002) argue that newly arrived immigrants satisfy this need. They are often motivated by income as a means to larger goals, such as improving status in one's home country or buying a home. Moreover, low wages often appear generous compared to those offered in sending countries. Packing-plant work, particularly working on the "line" (i.e., disassembly or packaging), is labor intensive, hazardous, physically exhausting, with limited compensation and few unionized plants. Immigrant laborers will often accept industry positions that require them to work the double shifts and overtime that few US-born people will do for comparable wages (Griffith et al. 1995). Massey et al. (2002) conclude, "Taken together, motivation problems, structural inflation, and economic dualism create a demand for a particular kind of worker: one willing to labor under unpleasant conditions, at low wages, in jobs with great instability and little chance for advancement" (17).

Immigrant Laborers. Packing plants recruit immigrant laborers from Mexico to Asia, and near US borders, particularly Texas and California. Wages earned by packing employees range from \$7 to \$10 an hour (Hedges and Hawkins 1996), with an annual income of roughly \$15,500 to \$22,000 (Barkley 1995) depending on type of job and length of tenure. Hispanics and Asians dominate the labor forces of midwestern meatpacking plants.

Nationally, 36% of packing-plant employees sustain serious injuries annually (Personick and Taylor-Shirley 1989; Hedges and Hawkins 1996); the majority of injuries are related to cumulative trauma disorder (CTD),

such as carpal tunnel syndrome (Stull 1994). Because of the exceedingly low wages, many employees cannot afford health care. Health coverage for line workers typically does not begin until employees have worked at least three months (Broadway et al. 1994). Not surprisingly, an exceptionally high industry labor turnover rate exists, with estimates ranging from 20% to 80% annually.

Community Impacts. Rapid population growth taxes a community's ability to provide housing (Gouveia and Stull 1995; Prochaska-Cue and Ziebarth 1997; Whitener 2001), education, health care, and welfare services (Broadway 2000) and often results in a heightened sense of racism and discrimination (Rhoads 1992; Prochaska-Cue and Ziebarth 1997). Minority school enrollments explode as does the need for teachers of ESL (i.e., English as a Second Language), causing a burden on schools' budgets. In many communities, teachers lack Spanish-speaking skills, yet a dramatic increase in the number of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) children have entered rural school districts. Educational quality comprises an issue that is not likely to subside in the near future, as rural community industry continues to attract immigrant and migrant workers. Many immigrants do not feel welcome as they enter small rural towns (Dalla et al. 2004); language barriers present additional difficulties to community-wide adaptation to rapid population change.

Local residents often report feeling that the quality of life in their communities has deteriorated given the large influx of employment-seeking immigrant laborers (Broadway et al. 1994). And, although long-time residents admit that the industries bring work and strengthen the local income, they also blame the processing plants for many community-wide problems (Stull, 1990; Stull et al. 1992; Stull and Broadway 1995). Clearly, communities experiencing rapid population growth and an influx of immigrant laborers are forced to grapple with shrinking community-wide resources. Many communities feel that they cannot sustain their current growth levels, but neither can they afford to lose the industries that employ the immigrant and migrant populations.

Although long-term resident concerns regarding rapid influx of immigrant populations have been documented, few have sought to examine the opposite: namely, perceptions of benefits of a multicultural community. Additionally, long-term, non-Hispanic white residents' ideas for strengthening their communities have been frequently overlooked; instead, the researcher typically imposes objective "suggestions," which may or may not be subjectively appropriate or viable. This investigation sought to address

these gaps. First, long-term residents were asked to describe the most significant changes evident in their communities since the influx of immigrant newcomers, and relatedly, to describe their biggest concerns centering around those changes. Second, this investigation sought to document residents' feelings of the positive and beneficial outcomes of a multicultural community. Finally, strategies for strengthening rural communities experiencing rapid demographic and cultural change were explored.

Methods

Three rural Nebraska meatpacking communities were included. Schuyler, in Colfax County, has a population of 4,720. Schuyler has housed an Excel beef packing plant since 1984; approximately 70% of its employees are of Latino descent. Norfolk and Madison are located in Madison County. BeefAmerica closed its doors in Norfolk (population 33,000) in 1998, but the plant was reopened in 1999, newly acquired by IBP. IBP also runs a pork plant in Madison (population 2,309), with approximately 65% of its employees of Latino decent. It is important to note that Excel is unionized, while the two IBP plants in Madison and Norfolk are not. These communities were targeted for inclusion because all house a meatpacking plant and all have experienced rapid demographic change due to the influx of immigrant laborers.

Participants

Forty-five non-Hispanic white, long-term community residents participated. They ranged in age from 23 to 78 (mean age = 48 years). Most ($n = 36$; 80%) were married or divorced ($n = 6$; 13%). The majority owned their homes ($n = 38$; 84%); few rented ($n = 5$) or owned a farm ($n = 2$). Number of years of education ranged from 12 to 16 (mean = 13.7). The mean number of children was 2.7 (range = 1-6) and most ($n = 23$; 51%) reported annual household incomes of more than \$30,000. Thirty-four participants (76%) had lived in their respective communities for more than 15.1 years (see Table 1 for additional demographic data).

Procedures

A community coordinator was hired within each community to recruit participants and act as liaison between the participants and the research investigators. Community coordinators were identified through extension

TABLE 1
DEMOGRAPHIC DATA: LONG-TERM, WHITE, NON-HISPANIC
RESIDENTS

Variable	Schuyler (n = 15)	Norfolk (n = 15)	Madison (n = 15)	Total (n = 45)
Age:				
Mean	54.6	43.9	44.7	47.7
Range	33-76	23-71	36-78	23-78
Ethnicity:				
Caucasian	15	15	15	45
Marital status:				
Single	0	1	0	1
Married	11	12	13	36
Divorced	2	2	2	6
Widowed	2	0	0	2
Residence:				
Own home	14	13	11	38
Rent home/apt.	1	2	2	5
Own farm	0	0	2	2
Education:				
Mean (no. of years)	12.9	14.6	13.5	13.7
Range (no. of years)	12-16	12-16	12-16	12-16
Standard deviation	1.4	1.6	1.6	1.5
Number of children:				
Mean	2.3	2.7	3.1	2.7
Range	1-5	1-5	1-6	1-6
Annual income:				
<\$10,000	2	0	1	3
\$10,000-\$20,000	2	5	2	9
\$20,000-\$30,000	5	1	2	8
\$30,000-\$50,000	4	3	6	13
>\$50,000	1	6	3	10
Time in community (years):				
3.1-6.0	1	1	2	4
6.1-10.0	1	1	0	2
10.1-15.0	1	3	1	5
15.1-20	1	1	2	4
>20	11	9	10	30

educators based on length of community residence, knowledge of community, and positive rapport with community residents. Participation required that residents represent various segments of the communities (e.g., private business, police, political, education) and had lived in the communities for more than 10 years. (Six participants had lived in the communities for less than 10 years; however, due to their direct experience in working with immigrant groups, for instance, in education system or social services, they were included in the investigation.) All participants engaged in an in-depth, tape-recorded interview with the principal investigator or a trained graduate-level research assistant (mean interview length = 90 minutes). Interviews were then transcribed verbatim. Participants were compensated \$20 for their time.

Data Analyses. Interview data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis (Taylor and Bogdan 1984; Aronson 1994). The process begins with a thorough reading of all transcribed data and the listing of patterns of experiences. Patterns are then classified into meaningful categories and expanded by adding all information from the transcribed interviews that relates to those categories or themes. The next step involves combining and cataloging related patterns into subthemes. All data were coded by the principal investigator and trained graduate assistants. When coding discrepancies arose, original transcripts were reexamined until coding agreement could be reached.

Results

Community Change and Issues of Concern

The primary changes evident in Schuyler, Norfolk, and Madison were explained as follows: increased population and, with that, increased ethnic and cultural diversity, more crime, shortages in affordable and quality housing, overcrowded schools, and an inception of Mexican owned and operated businesses.

Changing Demographics. When asked to describe the most significant changes in their communities, residents overwhelmingly described an increased population, particularly individuals of Mexican and Latin American descent. At the same time, a decrease in the non-Hispanic white population was mentioned by some. "White flight" was described as resulting from individuals unable to adapt to the demographic changes within their com-

munities. Clearly, however, flight from rural communities, particularly those lacking viable employment options, is not a phenomenon exclusively evident in meatpacking communities (Allen 1993). Young adults are particularly unlikely to remain in communities that offer few employment alternatives. So, although the white population was perceived by some as shrinking, the communities were still described as experiencing population increases due to the rapid influx of immigrants. Participants further noted changing age and gender profiles of their communities. The newest immigrants tended to be single, young men, although the trend of entire families, many with young children, immigrating into the communities was becoming more pronounced.

Also, with an increasingly diversified population, participants remarked about the new businesses catering to Hispanic tastes and needs. Mexican restaurants, clothing and dress shops, and grocery-store items were mentioned by nearly everyone who was interviewed. Many noted the fiscal benefits of Mexican-owned businesses (see "Benefits" below).

Schools. A second prominent theme to emerge centered on the local schools. Participants noted the obvious: a significant increase in the Hispanic community population corresponded with a significant increase of Hispanic (and non-English-speaking) school-age children. The schools were filled beyond capacity, and moreover, a recent school bond to expand the high school in Schuyler was defeated. Trailers were placed next to the high school to house the overflow of students. An elementary school administrator remarked, "The influx of Hispanic students was a complete surprise to the schools. . . . We were frustrated; we weren't equipped to handle it." Several expressed concern that their children were not receiving adequate instructional attention due to the larger class sizes. In reference to her granddaughter, one woman explained, "She [granddaughter] says to me 'Grandma, the teacher just doesn't have time for us.'" Several participants also remarked that it was not uncommon for parents with financial resources to remove their children from the public school systems and place them in parochial schools where fewer Hispanic children attended due to cost.

Clearly, inadequate resources was the prominent concern in participants' descriptions of school change. More people meant larger classes, thus, lower teacher-to-student attention. Also, due to many students' limited English proficiency, dwindling resources were spent on hiring ESL teachers. Moreover, teaching "styles" had changed, by necessity, to accommodate a rapidly changing school population. Participants were frustrated that

the consequence meant lowered educational quality for their own children and resources were simply not available to eradicate the problems.

Housing. Participants frequently remarked about the shortage of affordable and quality housing. In order to make up for the inadequate housing, people were beginning to take up residence in nearby communities and commute to work. There was certainly animosity toward this strategy in that long-term residents felt that the “bedroom” communities were experiencing economic growth through the construction of homes and through business and grocery purchases. Thus, economic growth was being thwarted, directly and indirectly, due to housing inadequacy. Another consequence, noted by some, was that “it doesn’t feel like a small community anymore.” It was explained further that when individuals live, work, and play in the same areas, a “communal” feeling emerges; people know and interact with one another. This, they felt, was not happening, partially because of limited housing and partially due to language barriers. Some participants noted that many immigrants, in addition to taking up residence in bedroom communities, house several generations together in single-family dwellings. Regardless of whether this was a cultural difference or coping strategy due to limited availability of homes, participants were frustrated by the situation. One, for instance, explained, “I don’t think it’s sanitary for 15 or 20 people to be living in one house.” Others appealed to the economics of multigeneration family residence patterns; purchasing one home, for instance, instead of two or three, ultimately lowered property tax revenue.

Crime. Some participants described a felt increase in crime in their communities, particularly auto-related transgressions such as driving without a license or insurance. One participant explained, “The whole town has been impacted by the Hispanic people not knowing the laws. The jail is always full.” Another explained her belief that, because of the newcomers’ stable employment, many are able to purchase a car for the first time. She stated, “So, they aren’t aware of driving or licensing laws.” Despite a clear association in the minds of many that the newcomers were somewhat lawless, others were more objective in their views. One participant in particular stated, “The increase in crime is due to an increase in population generally, coupled with younger demographics, not just because of the Hispanic influx.” Indeed, as noted by Eitzen (1996), “Crime is mainly a problem of male youth” (332). Violent crime in particular peaks between the ages of 17 and 24. It is not uncommon for crime to increase as populations surge, particularly when the young adult male population is disproportionately high.

Prejudice. Several participants spoke of frustration in relation to (seemingly minor) behaviors or cultural differences. For instance, four individuals claimed that Hispanics (generally speaking) parked their cars on the lawn, failed to mow their lawns, or hung their laundry on bushes rather than a clothesline. One individual stated, "Immigrants feel they can do to their homes what they did in Mexico. Put junk wherever they want it, their yards are dried up, they drive right up to the front door." And another noted, "Their total lifestyle is drastically different from ours. . . . There's trash all over the streets and [we] just can't go to bed at night because there's music blaring outside and it's just not a community we want to have at all." Unfortunately, when perceived "differences" are prescribed to an entire group (e.g., "Hispanics"), prejudicial attitudes or even discriminatory behavior may result (Memmi 2000).

Geographically United, Culturally Apart. Perceived community changes described above (e.g., housing shortages, overcrowded schools) were largely overshadowed by the dominant theme of community "separateness." Simply stated, participants felt that their communities were beginning to splinter, the result being two distinct communities: one "non-Hispanic white" and the other "Hispanic." Schuyler, Norfolk, and Madison were frequently described as lacking integration and unity. One Schuyler resident commented, "There are 'white' bars and 'Hispanic' bars, 'white' stores and 'Hispanic' stores, separate masses. . . . There is some integration among the kids, in sports and the classrooms, but not as far as community goes." Another made an interesting point: "There is a division among those who think the long-term residents should do more to bring the two cultures together and others thinking they [the Latinos] need to integrate themselves." She continued, "People need to talk more about how to solve the problem—not just talk about the problem."

The biggest barrier to integration, as explained by nearly all who were interviewed, involved language. One Norfolk resident explained, "I have nice Hispanic neighbors, but we don't do anything together because of language difficulties." Another explained his view that the use of translators, although helpful for immediate communication goals, was cumbersome for conversational purposes and particularly difficult if children translated. He said, "The children five and six years old translate for their parents and it's frustrating for all involved." And one individual, who was also frustrated due to her limited ability to communicate with non-English speakers, was empathetic to the newcomers' situation. She explained, "The community doesn't know how to react to somebody who doesn't speak

English. I hear people say things like ‘This language thing drives me crazy’ and ‘If they’re going to be here they need to be able to speak our language.’ For crying out loud, it doesn’t take two days to learn a new language!” Others were more cynical and less understanding in their views. A Madison respondent relayed his sentiment that “Most people think that the newcomers should learn English. Very few [English-only speakers] try and learn Spanish. They feel that their parents learned English when they came from Czechoslovakia, so the Latino populations should as well.” Clearly, the ability to communicate with one’s neighbors and coworkers would drastically reduce misunderstandings and gradually improve community integration. Yet learning a new language does take time—a luxury that few immigrant newcomers have. Packing-plant work is physically demanding and dangerous, and work schedules can be grueling. Workers sometimes labor nine or ten hours a day six days a week, and overtime is not always voluntary (see Dalla et al. 2004). The emotional and physical energy, in addition to the time commitment necessarily involved in learning a new language, is certainly daunting, if not impossible, to many adult immigrant newcomers. A Schuyler participant proclaimed, “The community is failing in trying to teach English to Hispanic [adults]. We need to try harder to find ways of integration.”

Overall, participants’ perceptions of community change and subsequent concerns parallel those of long-term residents in other rural meatpacking communities (see Broadway et al. 1994; Gouveia and Stull 1995). This was not a surprise; indeed, it was expected that participants would mention overcrowded schools, housing shortages, and communication problems as community concerns. It was nonetheless deemed necessary to obtain participants’ subjective opinions regarding community-wide “problems” before embarking on a discussion of potential strategies for “resolving” those issues. In the sections that follow, participants’ views of the *benefits* of a multicultural community are described, as are strategies for addressing community needs in order to enrich the lives of all residents.

Benefits of Immigrant Newcomers

A “strengths” approach to examining social phenomena involves assessing assets (whether of an individual, family, community, or society) and then implementing those “gifts” in new or novel ways in order to address problematic, or potentially problematic, situations. Participants were asked to describe the benefits of the immigrant newcomers on their respective communities. It was hoped that identified “strengths” could then be used for

strategic planning purposes. Two themes emerged: (1) the economic boom provided by the newcomers and (2) the cultural diversity introduced by new immigrant populations.

Economics. Without hesitation, nearly all participants agreed that the immigrant newcomers provided a financial boost to their communities. Many remarked that the immigrant laborers worked in the packing plants, where few long-term residents would work, thus allowing the plants to remain open. “The Hispanic population,” it was explained, “provides a way for Excel to stay open.” And all but a handful of the 45 participants agreed that community viability *depended* on the packing-plant industry. A Norfolk participant stated, “I don’t think Excel could have gotten local labor to fill the need, and without that [labor], I don’t know if Excel would have continued to expand.” Additionally, the fiscal impact of the immigrant newcomers was evident beyond providing labor for the packing plants. “Without the Mexican stores, Schuyler wouldn’t have anything,” stated one participant. A Madison resident remarked, “They [the immigrant newcomers] shop in the stores and bars. . . . They buy homes.” The overwhelming sentiment was summed up nicely in the comments of a business owner who stated, “I think it’s a big boon to the city that they [Latino immigrants] spend money here. They make purchases here—I think that’s great.” In relation to the community-wide tax advantages, a resident noted that “The immigrants have kept businesses in town—which has kept our tax base up. A lot of people don’t think they [the immigrants] pay taxes, but they do, just like everybody else.” Others noted the indirect financial benefits of the immigrant influx, particularly in the construction boom due to the necessity of additional housing units.

In addition to shopping in local stores and working in the plants, many entrepreneurial newcomers had opened their own stores. Mexican restaurants were frequently mentioned, as were stores catering to Latin tastes (i.e., clothing, music, household items). These enterprises were respected, and their overall value to the local communities evident. One person stated, “[The new businesses] have brought some life into the town.” And finally, “If it weren’t for the immigrants this place would just be a dust bowl as far as we’re concerned.”

Significantly, in contrast to the comments of some indicating that the newcomers failed to care for their property (i.e., failing to mow the lawn), others remarked that older homes or homes needing attention were being purchased and attended to by the new immigrant homeowners. Thus, not

only were property values positively impacted, such actions also made certain neighborhoods more aesthetically pleasing.

Cultural Diversity. Another prominent theme to emerge in participants' accounts of the beneficial impacts of the immigrant influx focused on cultural diversity, or exposure to different life experiences, value systems, and languages. A majority of respondents perceived that the newcomers placed special emphasis on "family." A Norfolk resident expressed her view that "Many could learn from Hispanics' commitment to family." The newcomers were also described as having a strong work ethic; particularly valued was the immigrants' willingness to work in physically demanding positions, such as at the packing plants, in order to earn a living. Upon reflection on the sacrifices the immigrants made in order to live and work in the rural Midwest, another participant stated, "I admire Hispanics—many have come 2,000 miles without knowing the language, just to work." She continued, "They are good role models."

Although language differences were clearly perceived as "barriers" to adult conversation in particular, and community integration in general, some observed that exposure to a new language could be potentially beneficial, especially for children. One parent said, "The children are learning a new language and learning about the values of others. . . . They are learning that the world is a bigger place." Another reiterated these sentiments and remarked, "People have the opportunity to come into contact with other cultures—it makes the community more 'real.'"

Strategies for Strengthening Multicultural Rural Communities

To address the final issue, that of programmatic strategies for community-wide well-being, participants were asked the following: "What could other rural communities do, knowing what you now know, to prepare for a rapid influx of immigrant newcomers?" and "What could this community do in order to facilitate or encourage integration among *all* community members?" Several felt overwhelmed by the multiple and interdependent community "needs," many of which necessitated financial resources that did not exist. Others were reflective, offering advice and suggestions. Several themes were identified in participants' suggestions for strengthening their communities; these are described below.

Multicultural Education. The first theme to emerge was the need for community-wide cross-cultural education. Participants sometimes remarked

that those community members who were the most frustrated by the changing demographic structure of their communities lacked knowledge about Latino cultures. Fear entered into participants' descriptions. Specifically, it was noted that individuals tend to fear what they do not understand. Fear often leads to avoidance and may cause people to further misjudge the object of their fears, in this case, new immigrants. In effect, a self-fulfilling prophecy may result in which negative labels or characteristics are assigned to the new immigrants, whose actions or behaviors are then evaluated based on preconceived ideas, thus confirming one's negative beliefs (Dovidio and Gaertner 1986).

At least four participants in each of the three communities described the immediate need for cultural education programs in the schools (i.e., elementary, middle, and high schools) and in the larger community as well, in order to enhance acceptance, understanding, and respect. One participant noted, "Hispanics respect our culture, but we don't respect theirs." Another noted, "Community residents don't try to understand Hispanic culture." And one frustrated participant exclaimed, "People need to stop thinking it's 1950 and change with the times." Still, the comments of one Madison resident indicated that, regardless of community-wide efforts, changing attitudes is not a simple task. She remarked, "Some people won't accept the immigrants no matter what is done, although cultural education classes might help." Interestingly, most participants who felt multicultural education would benefit the community were typically those who had lived in bigger cities at some point in their lives and thus had prior exposure to a variety of people representing diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, languages, and lifestyles.

Others suggested hiring several "cultural mediators," individuals who would work within the communities whose sole purpose would be to mediate, educate, and enhance communication between the Hispanic and non-Hispanic white communities. Others recommended hiring "experts" who could offer the community advice and arrange culturally based educational conferences for adults and youth on acceptance and cultural differences, in addition to teaching about the impact of "labeling." Such endeavors could be paid for out of grant monies, it was noted, perhaps with a long-term goal of creating business partnerships between Hispanic and non-Hispanic community residents.

Others noted the urgency of finding and hiring additional bilingual teachers and interpreters. One resident indicated that qualified individuals with bilingual skills were clearly lacking in all areas related to healthy

community functioning, including the medical, educational, public service (e.g., police), and legal arenas. One participant stated, “The interpreters are in short supply. We [the community] need more interpreters and we need to pay them more. Our current interpreters are overworked and underpaid.”

Children, Youth, and Schools. Many believed the first step toward integrating their multicultural community was to focus on younger generations. Local schools were identified as primary community resources, and thus the most effective vehicle for providing and disseminating multicultural education. As one participant stated, “It’s [acceptance of diversity] got to start in the schools. . . . School improvement is key—families look to the schools for direction and assistance.” And another made a strong point by saying, “Kids don’t notice anyone is a different color—kids play together in multicultural groups, [but there is] little mingling between the two groups [Hispanic and non-Hispanic] in the adult community. Kids can make adults closer.” Finally, one person reported his view that “The only efforts to integrate have been made by the schools.”

On the bright side, residents felt that integration was possible and that children held the key to unifying the communities; unfortunately, most also felt nothing could be done until the communities’ children were adults. As an example, one resident explained the division between the immigrant newcomers and long-term residents: “When we first came to Schuyler there was a lot of resentment, anger, and animosity [toward the immigrant newcomers]—things are getting better, but this is a generational phenomenon. The kids are integrating in schools and much won’t change until that generation is adult.”

Role of the Packing Plants. A number of participants spoke of the role the packing plants could play in integrating the new immigrants and long-term residents. Despite the economic benefits to local communities who housed packing plants, several residents felt the plants should take responsibility for the changing community demographics and invest substantial financial resources into mitigating subsequent problems. A Schuyler participant stated, “The packing plant should pay for the expansion of the schools—they recruited the immigrants.” And a Madison resident reported, “If IBP did more in terms of community involvement, more people would see them as beneficial.” Schuyler and Madison participants also reported that many Excel and IBP executives lived in nearby towns and commuted to work; problems created by the rapid influx of immigrants did not affect them

directly. Participants were discouraged that the plant executives experienced all of the benefits of a large immigrant population (i.e., labor in their plants) but none of the negative consequences (e.g., overcrowded schools, housing shortages).

Additional Suggestions. The following three suggestions for community integration were reported by single individuals; that is, they were not “themes” that emerged in the responses of multiple respondents but nonetheless provide potentially useful starting points. One individual reported that all laws, particularly in relation to operating vehicles, should be thoroughly explained to all new immigrants. Another was concerned that the immigrants were being exploited by “money hungry” property owners who neglected to provide safe housing. She stated, “Housing is a big issue, [and] we need to get rid of the slum landlords.” Finally, a third individual reported the need for a variety of industries; that the immigrant newcomers had few employment choices. Furthermore, many residents felt ambivalent toward the packing plants, and by association, that ambivalence extended to anyone who worked in the plants, namely immigrant newcomers.

Discussion

Long-term residents’ perceptions of the beneficial impacts of new immigrant laborers and their families have rarely been explored. Moreover, previous studies of meatpacking communities have neglected to assess long-term residents’ suggestions for mitigating negative consequences of rapid population influx. Using a strengths-based approach, this investigation was designed to delineate specific strategies for focusing on the positive aspects and assets of multicultural meatpacking communities in the hopes of building bridges between long-term residents and immigrant newcomers. While several thematic patterns evident in previous research resurfaced in this investigation, it is important to note that the participants in this study reported that the influx of immigrants was beneficial to their community’s economic well-being. Moreover, several participants stated that their attitudes and responses to the influx of new residents was actually part of the challenge that confronted community cohesion and vitality.

Multicultural education was frequently identified as an urgent “need” by the study’s participants. Schools, it was reported, should be in the forefront of attempts to integrate the immigrant newcomers and long-term residents. Of the three communities targeted for this investigation, Madison

appeared most progressive in attempts to integrate immigrant newcomers. Many Madison respondents noted that the elementary school provided a model for acceptance and inclusiveness for all children, regardless of ethnicity or country of origin. Much of the work to provide such an atmosphere was initiated by the school's principal, Dave Finley. In an extended interview, Mr. Finley (personal communication 2003) described the process and work undertaken to provide an inclusive, welcoming environment for all students. In the process, Madison Elementary went on Distinguished School Status within five years of Mr. Finley's becoming principal.

The school restructuring involved multiple interdependent programs, two of which will be briefly described. Given Mr. Finley's philosophical orientation, "leveling" was initiated. Leveling is based on the idea that primary content areas (i.e., language arts and math) comprise "skills," not "subjects." Mr. Finley remarked, "They are not 'subjects,' they are tools for understanding all other content areas. One must have mastery of these skills, not just exposure. Mastery is vital." In the leveling system, children's mastery of specific skills is assessed and they are then assigned to multi-aged learning "pods" based on skill level. Thus, students of different ages but similar skills work closely together. A facet of this program is "component repairing." Due to high mobility, immigrant children often have gaps in their knowledge base (i.e., gaps in skills in primary areas). Through component repairing, those gaps are "repaired," thus allowing children to catch up to their age-mates rapidly, without being "held back" such as might occur in the traditional education model. Mr. Finley explained, "This structure allows kids to have success. When they have success they feel safe and secure and it is easier for them to build confidence in other areas, such as social skills with peers, because they have a sense of competence."

He further described the importance of including family in the learning process. Many immigrant children come from low-income families where both parents work; many of the kids are "latchkey" children and engage in much self-care. Mr. Finley explained, "We wanted parents to value learning and for it to be evident in their behaviors. Parents need to be able to attend to kids' education. This is often not possible given the circumstances of many new immigrant families." Thus, they initiated the "parent education program" which assisted parents in studying for the General Equivalency Degree (GED), learning computer skills, and assisting their children with homework. Additionally, a "family literacy" program was established where families participated in workshops and earned "points" to be used to purchase books. Thus, families were able to build personal home

libraries. Mr. Finley asserted, "It's a matter of becoming actively involved. . . . It became the schools' responsibility to provide an equal playing ground for all kids in the schools." He further noted, "We built a community within the school so that kids felt welcome and excited about school, where they wanted to learn." With regard to inter-ethnic tension, he reported, "You can sink millions of dollars into programs trying to change parents' attitudes and they won't work. But if you work with the kids—kids can change parental attitudes." Finally, and in contrast to some of the long-term residents' perceptions of the packing plants, Mr. Finley reported, "IBP paid for many of these programs—they [IBP] were vital in their [the programs'] development and continued success."

Another potentially effective strategy for building bridges between diverse cultural groups entails focusing on the similarities between them by finding common ground for agreement and enhanced appreciation of one another. Dalla et al. (2004) conducted intense interviews with 43 Latino immigrants residing in rural meatpacking communities. The primary factors for immigration included the following: job opportunities and economic security, educational opportunities for children, and safety (i.e., avoiding areas plagued by gangs, violence, and drugs). Regardless of ethnicity, nationality, or language preference, few could disagree that these "needs" are desired by all. Just like their new immigrant neighbors, long-time residents are concerned with financial stability, with providing safe homes, neighborhoods, and communities for their children, and with providing opportunities for their children to receive quality education. Certainly, cultural differences exist between immigrant newcomers and long-term community residents. Any form of cultural education must address and inform these issues. However, many similarities also exist; these should not be overlooked, as they provide avenues for uniting divided communities for the common good. Social psychologists have long purported success in uniting divisive groups by removing competition (e.g., for limited resources) and inducing cooperative work to solve mutual problems (Sherif 1988).

Finally, one Schuyler participant stated, "We [the community] didn't do enough to welcome the immigrants when the influx began." She was frustrated by her community's limited interest in the immigrant newcomers and believed actions should have been taken to "welcome" the newcomers into the community. She believed such actions might have mitigated community divisiveness. In a recent book, *The Middle of Everywhere: The World's Refugees Come to Our Town*, Mary Pipher (2002) describes specific strategies or proactive steps one can take to welcome immigrant newcomers,

including: visit at any given chance—on the streets or in stores—and provide assistance when someone looks lost or confused; encourage your church or civic group to adopt a family; join a group that helps new Americans learn English or work toward a GED; volunteer at an agency that serves immigrants and refugees; and make contributions of cash or goods to agencies that assist struggling families. Finally, when working with individuals for whom English is a new language, two rules apply: (1) don't assume anything and (2) always ask questions.

Conclusion

These findings underscore the important “bridging” roles of practice and policy. The impact of immigrants on communities is not the sole responsibility of a single entity. If communities are vested in sustaining and improving the quality of life for all residents, then multiple sectors (e.g., law enforcement, education, health, housing) must strive to work from a common paradigm. This implies that community leaders must establish a collective efficacy; communities should strive to develop shared beliefs in their ability to meet challenges and/or respond to changing community dynamics (Sampson et al. 1997, 1999; Morenoff et al. 2001). While their work focused on the reduction of violence (Sampson et al. 1997), their finding that community violence was negatively correlated with collective efficacy (i.e., community cohesiveness) lends support to the notion that a community's efficacy may benefit from new and emergent strategies when parameters of “common good” can be established among multiple community sectors.

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