

Research & Policy Brief Series

ISSUE NUMBER 3/MARCH 2007

New Yorkers' Perceptions of Immigrants and Immigration

By Max J. Pfeffer & Pilar A. Parra

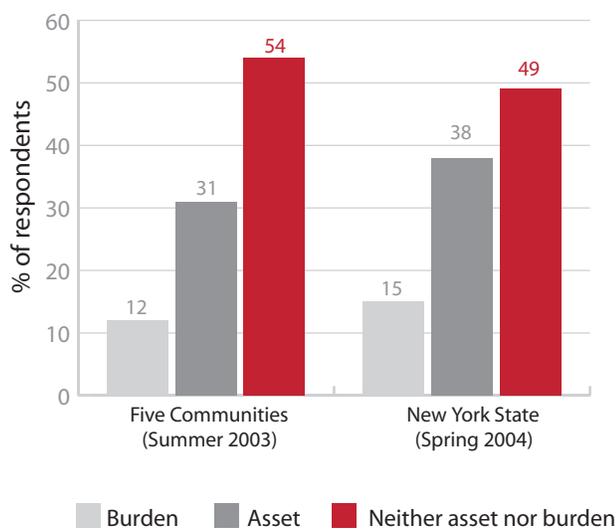
The Consequences of Immigration are Experienced Most Intensely at the Local Level

At the same time that the issue of immigration and its impacts on American society is being hotly debated in the national political arena, the populations of many rural New York State communities are becoming more ethnically diverse. This trend has been most notable since the 1990s with the upsurge in Mexican migration. While there are certainly national, regional, and state-level impacts from increased immigration, the impacts and consequences of immigration are often experienced most intensely at the local community level. These diversifying communities are faced with a range of opportunities and challenges associated with this population change. In general, how do New Yorkers view these immigrants and immigration?

How was the Study Conducted?

We asked community residents for their opinion about the presence of immigrants in their own communities. To do this, we focused on five upstate communities with a strong presence of Mexican immigrants, many of whom first came to the area to work as farmworkers. Two communities we studied are on the northern fringes of the New York City metropolitan area, and three are in more rural areas of northwestern New York. We convened seven focus groups with community residents who had no involvement in farmwork, and interviewed key informants and 1,250 randomly selected individuals living in these communities. We also added questions to Cornell University's annual Empire State Poll to assess how closely opinions in our five communities matched those of a statistically representative sample of New York State residents.

Figure 1: Perception of immigrants as an asset or burden, five New York communities and New York State



Source: Pfeffer & Parra, Department of Development Sociology, Cornell University

New Yorkers' General Attitudes Towards Immigration and Immigrants

- A small proportion of community members considered immigrants a burden, and about one-third thought of them as an asset, but most people were ambivalent about immigrants. The Empire State Poll, a statewide survey of New Yorkers, explored the same question with similar results; about half of New Yorkers considered immigrants neither an asset nor a burden (see Figure 1).
- Contrasting opinions are reflected in the following comments by community residents:

Communities react differently to the new immigrants; some are more welcoming and some are bad. This community has been more tolerant, but the welcomingness is not genuine—they make very clear where the line is in terms of how much you fit in.

The communities are just going to [have to] accept that it's going to be more diverse.

In this area there are persons very supportive of immigrant workers, and [they] try to help to get papers for the immigrant families working with them, and community members that perceive immigrants as the cause of community problems.

- The most important concern regarding new immigrants in the five communities and in New York State as a whole is economic growth and job creation.
- Community members who have more education and are employed in managerial and professional occupations are more likely to consider immigrants an asset to their communities, often noting that immigrants take jobs that others in the community are unwilling to do:

Immigrants bring cultural differences, which are good, bring in talent, and a lot of them are service people in jobs that others won't do, which is good.

The biggest challenge is for residents to understand why the immigrants are here, and that they are doing really good work that Americans, especially young Americans, are not willing to do.

- On the other hand, some community residents view immigrants as competitors for their jobs, and noted the lack of adequate employment opportunities in the community:

Immigrants' working for low wages makes it hard for Americans to get a job because immigrants would be hired first.

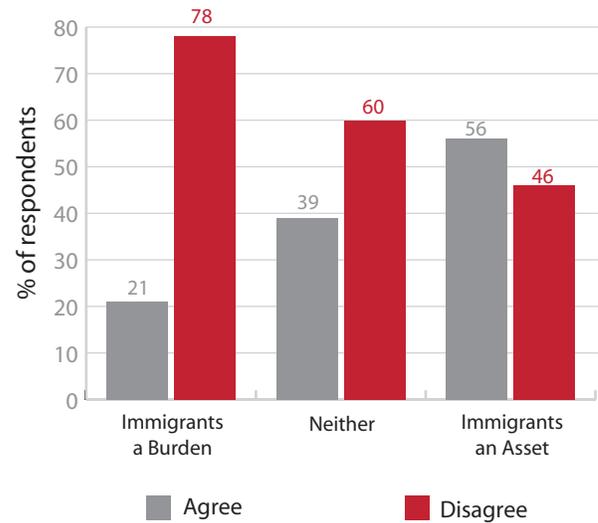
There aren't enough jobs to go around right now, it keeps the salaries down because there is always someone there to take a job.

- Overall, community residents are skeptical that immigrants bring businesses and jobs into their communities, but opinions about the economic impacts of immigration on the community are sometimes sharply divided. This varies depending on whether respondents view immigrants as a burden or an asset (see Figure 2).

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Most people have little regular interaction with immigrants and are not aware of their needs or capabilities. Consequently, they do not have a clear opinion about the likely impacts of immigrants on their communities, nor do they have clear ideas about the potential role of immigrants in community development. Immigrants need more opportunities to develop social ties to other community residents, and civic organizations offer means of promoting such linkages. In particular, communities need to do more to encourage forms of civic engagement that include immigrants. Com-

Figure 2: Belief that immigrants bring new businesses and jobs by perception of immigrants as an asset or burden, five New York communities, 2003



Source: Pfeffer & Parra, Department of Development Sociology, Cornell University

munity efforts to promote language training and certain types of technical training could play an important part in furthering the social and economic integration of immigrants into the community and provide employers with a more qualified workforce.

Will these new community residents be an asset or a burden to a community? This question will be answered by the types of actions communities take. Lack of active efforts to integrate immigrants into the social and economic life of the community will likely result in the development of a group that is poor and marginal to the community's mainstream. People who are not well integrated into community life typically have a low standard of living and do not contribute to the overall development of the community to the fullest extent possible. The integration of immigrants into community life can be part of a larger community development strategy that attracts employers who need workers with particular skills. The diversity introduced by immigrants can also be a community asset that helps to draw other workers who value more varied community life. The diversification of New York communities offers a new resource in community development that deserves careful attention.

