

Integrating the Needs of Immigrant Workers and Rural Communities **Part 1 of 4: Immigrants and the Community**

by

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What is the Issue?

While population loss and economic stagnation or declines have been pervasive in upstate New York for decades, ethnic diversification due to immigration has stemmed the ongoing population decline in certain communities. One source of immigrants increasingly likely to settle in rural areas is agricultural workers. These workers are found in some of the most remote rural communities and are increasingly choosing to settle there. Often these workers are easily integrated into the communities, but at other times their presence creates tensions with long-time residents. Community members are relatively unaware of the needs and aspirations of others in the community, especially of immigrant farm workers. Are immigrants an asset to a community?

The goal of the project is to provide information about the nature and consequences of increasing numbers of immigrants settling in New York communities. We provide this information to help communities address important questions. For example, does the appearance of immigrants lead to renewed community development opportunities?

What are the Highlights?

- Hispanic immigrants are settling in rural communities nationwide. In the five upstate New York communities included in this study, Hispanics, who are mostly of Mexican origin, are the fastest-growing population segment. The pattern of population change in the five communities is the same as that for New York State as a whole.
- Today's agricultural workforce in New York and nationwide is predominantly of Mexican origin.
- In the five communities studied, the growing presence of Mexican immigrants is the result of increasing numbers of farm workers and their families settling in the communities where they work.
- Foreign-born persons are more likely to settle in the United States if their spouse and children are with them, which was the case for 40 percent of farm workers interviewed in this study.
- Foreign-born farm workers reported that the major challenges to working in the United States are learning the language and gaining access to health services, education, and training. Other important challenges are finding places to socialize and learning the U.S. culture.

- Speaking English is an important prerequisite for obtaining goods and services and finding year-round employment. Approximately 40 percent of farm workers reported they could understand and speak some English. Those who have been in the United States longer and are not currently working in agricultural jobs are more proficient in English.

- Immigrants who come to the United States to work in agriculture are from rural areas in their country of origin where they typically have few educational opportunities. More than half of the farm workers surveyed reported having completed six or fewer years of education.

- Foreign-born farm workers rely on friends and family to help with necessities such as opening a bank account, getting a driver's license, and obtaining other resources they need to become integrated into the social and economic life of the community. But the friends and family themselves often have limited access to resources.

- The majority of foreign-born farm workers feel that the communities in which they live are welcoming. However, a significant minority has expressed mixed feelings about the communities' receptiveness of immigrants.

- Approximately half of non-immigrant residents consider that the number of outsiders in their communities is "just about right," and more than half consider immigrants "neither an asset nor a burden." In general, nonimmigrant residents in the five communities are ambivalent about the presence of immigrants in their community. This sentiment is similar to that expressed by New Yorkers statewide.

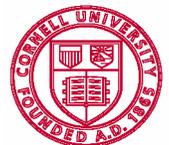
- Eighty percent of non-immigrant residents consider their communities to be open and supportive of new immigrants, compared with about 60 percent of foreign-born current and former farm workers.

- Non-immigrants list jobs, housing, and language skills as the main challenges for their communities in dealing with new immigrants.

How was the project conducted?

We chose five New York agricultural communities in different economic and social contexts that have relied heavily on hired farm labor. Each community has a minority population of some significance and a history of immigrant farm workers settling there. The communities have African American and/or Puerto Rican in addition to Mexican populations. Our qualitative data are drawn from interviews with key informants and focus groups with foreign-born farm workers and former farm workers. We also conducted focus groups with white nonimmigrant residents in the communities. Key informants included political, business, and religious leaders; police and school officials; farmers; and nongovernmental social service providers. The quantitative data include survey responses from three target groups: current foreign-born farm workers, former foreign-born farm workers, and non-farm community residents. Furthermore, to compare our findings with similar ones from a statewide perspective, we drew on the Cornell University Empire State Poll 2004, Immigration Omnibus Survey.

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