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Can Immigration Save Small-Town America?¹

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What is the Issue?

In the often polarized discussions over immigration, the point is sometimes missed that immigration often brings immediate and tangible benefits. Nowhere is this truer than in the “hollowing-out” parts of America. Many nonmetropolitan counties in America have seen net out-migration for decades. While young people have always left small towns, the loss of this group comes at a time when opportunities for those who stay have been severely reduced. One trend that runs counter to the population decline of many nonmetro areas is the influx of immigrants, the majority of Hispanic origin, during the 1990s and 2000s. While often controversial, new immigration may be an important source of population growth and economic dynamism in many distressed rural communities.

Immigration in Rural America: A Life Preserver or an Albatross?

With the restructuring of nonmetro America, many places are declining slowly and inexorably. The demographic shifts that mark this process are not limited to population loss. With the out-migration of the young and educated, those remaining in nonmetro America are older, less educated, and more likely to work in manual professions. The loss of population also means a declining

tax base, less support for local and small businesses, more retirees in need of health care, and less incentive for young professionals to locate in these areas. Small towns, counties, and even states that feel the effects of persistent out-migration have tried a raft of policy measures designed to stem “brain drain” and entice people to stay in or relocate to nonmetro America. However, the jury is still out as to whether these policies have the intended effect of stemming population loss and/or retaining educated young adults.

One trend that runs counter to rural population decline is the new influx of immigrants, the majority of Hispanic origin, during the 1990s and 2000s. Early results from the 2010 decennial census show that Hispanics accounted for most of the growth in nonmetro areas over the 2000s. Nonmetro areas overall grew modestly over the past decade, from 48.4 to 50.4 million people. As shown in Table 1, the nonmetro Hispanic population alone grew from 2.6 million to 3.8 million over the same period. Although Hispanics represented only 7.5 percent of the total nonmetro population in 2010, they nevertheless accounted for the majority of population growth.

In terms of raw numbers, then, the rural immigrant influx has helped stabilize population loss in several economically hard-hit places. Johnson and Lichter (2008)² showed that 221 nonmetropolitan counties would have experienced absolute

Table 1: Racial and Ethnic Distribution of the U.S. Population, by Metro Status and Year

Race/ethnicity	2000		2010	
	Total population	Percentage of total population	Total population	Percentage of total population
Nonmetro areas				
White	39,765,577	82.2	40,142,918	79.6
Minorities	8,586,502	17.8	10,284,857	20.4
Black	4,088,836	8.5	4,182,761	8.3
Native American	904,193	1.9	968,881	1.9
Asian	344,552	0.7	456,723	0.9
Mixed race	562,856	1.2	805,090	1.6
Hispanic	2,604,811	5.4	3,767,645	7.5
Metro areas				
White	154,787,197	66.4	156,674,634	60.7
Minorities	78,282,630	33.6	101,643,129	39.3
Black	29,859,001	12.8	33,503,087	13.0
Native American	1,164,690	0.5	1,278,217	0.5
Asian	9,778,617	4.2	14,008,401	5.4
Mixed race	4,039,290	1.7	5,161,391	2.0
Hispanic	32,701,007	14.0	46,709,949	18.1

Source: 2000 and 2010 U.S. Census: Summary File 1
Note: Hispanics may be of any race.

¹ A longer version of this article (entitled “Can Immigration Save Small-Town America? Hispanic Boomtowns and the Uneasy Path to Renewal”) originally appeared in *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* May 2012 vol. 641 no. 1 38-57.

² All references cited are available with the full article at: <http://ann.sagepub.com/content/641/1/38.full#ref-29>

population decline between 2000 and 2005 in the absence of Hispanic growth. Moreover, the new settlement of families with school-age children provides the added bonus of shoring up flagging school enrollments. With these positive developments also come some difficulties.

Much of the reason that immigrants move to rural America is to work in agriculture and agribusiness. The overall transformation of the food-processing industry, which includes a move away from cities to nonmetro areas, the consolidation of manufacturing, and mechanization and de-skilling of the jobs, has profoundly affected rural areas and the makeup of rural workers. In particular, immigrant workers have responded to the demand from food-processing companies for cheap labor. Most immigrants today are from Mexico and Latin America, but they also include Asians and Africans in some communities. Many have arrived directly from abroad rather than from traditional urban gateways and have little familiarity with local customs, the English language, or America's political and social institutions. These immigration trends have implications for the future well-being of nonmetropolitan America.

First, in terms of the raw economic impact, a sudden rise in population injects life into what are, in many cases, moribund local economies. Immigrants add to the tax base, spend their money locally, and inject cash into housing markets, and local goods and services. In North Carolina, for example, the Hispanic population contributed more than \$9 billion annually to the state's economy through its purchases and taxes (Kasarda and Johnson 2006). The costs in higher taxes and public services, such as health care and education, were far less than the taxes paid. A study in Oregon focusing on the economic impacts of eliminating unauthorized immigrants found a reduction of state and local tax revenues of between \$400 and \$656 million per year (Jaeger 2008). Under the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that local political and business elites are often more receptive than local workers to new Hispanic arrivals (Fennelly 2008).

Second, as we mentioned above, immigrants to nonmetro areas tend to be young and of childbearing age with school-age children. Unlike in the past (e.g., seasonal farm workers), many new arrivals increasingly are likely to be married and have families looking to settle (Farmer and Moon 2009). Indeed, fertility rates among Hispanics, especially new immigrants, are well in excess of those of native-born whites (Parrado 2011), and ethnic differentials are greatest in new destinations (Lichter et al. forthcoming). In rural places with chronic declines in school enrollment, immigrants have bolstered numbers and helped keep schools viable, but they also have raised new educational and fiscal challenges (e.g., English as a Second Language).

Third, alongside boons for local economies and school enrollments come demands on resources that, in many cases, are unforeseen by host communities. Immigrants tend to be younger and more economically disadvantaged than native-born residents and can consequently place demands on local services, such as health, education, and public assistance (Crowley and

Lichter 2009; Kandel 2006). Rapid changes in the ethno-racial composition of local school districts also may raise new ethnic hostilities if the costs are borne disproportionately by aging white taxpayers on fixed incomes who are unaccustomed to ethnically diverse neighbors (Poterba 1997). The generation gap now has a racial component in many new Hispanic destinations.

Fourth, immigration in many small towns has unfolded rapidly and unexpectedly, and the speed at which the nonnative population settles can have a destabilizing effect. This is most apparent where there is little effort to integrate the nonnative population into local institutions (Grey 2006). So, for instance, immigrants are residentially and socially segregated (Lichter et al. 2010). Because of their willingness to work hard for low pay and under poor working conditions, local manual and low-skill workers in some cases blame immigrants for lowering wages in local industry, which further fuels resentment toward outsiders (Jensen 2006; Marrow 2009). Local residents also sometimes believe—usually incorrectly—that immigrants bring trouble. So far, there is little evidence that immigration is associated with higher crime rates in areas of Hispanic settlement (Crowley and Lichter 2009; Sampson 2008).

Clearly there are both new opportunities and ongoing challenges posed by the unprecedented influx of immigrants to nonmetro America. If immigration is “done right,” it can provide an economic lifeline to many distressed places that are hollowing out because of chronic out-migration of young people. (In our full article³, we present case studies of two communities which approached the issue of local immigration in dramatically contrasting ways.)

Policy Implications for Immigration and Small Towns

There are several implications about the future of nonmetro America. First, the long-standing declines in population and jobs can be turned around through immigration, as the experiences of many small towns can attest. Second, the response of local stakeholders and local leaders to demographic change can have a profound impact on the community; that is, whether to respond with diffidence or to do so with inclusiveness. Third, the immigration policy landscape and enforcement climate is so muddled that a comprehensive overhaul at all levels of government is needed as a matter of urgency. The immigration debate is often held hostage to divisive politics that too often ignore the on-the-ground realities. It is time that the debate is informed by what is really happening locally, while also acknowledging the viewpoints of natives who sometimes feel that their way of life is under threat. These are lofty goals, and we are aware that a seismic shift is needed to move the issue forward. Failure to address them will mean that the new rural immigration will remain a vexed, contentious, and intractable issue for the foreseeable future.

³ See <http://ann.sagepub.com/content/64/1/38.full#ref-29>

