

# Economic Strain and Community Concerns in Three Meatpacking Communities

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Meat processing is a \$95-billion-per-year business dominated by Iowa Beef Processing (IBP), Cargill's Excel Corporation, and Con-Agra's Monfort Incorporated. These leading companies control 70 percent of U.S. cattle slaughter and 35 percent of the hog slaughter. Meatpacking, which requires little training or English language skills, is the primary magnet attracting immigrants to the Midwestern States. Importantly, migrational patterns are shifting. Migration patterns have been primarily circular in the past, with immigrants and migrants entering a community, securing employment, and leaving after completing the work. The immigrants entering rural Midwestern communities are beginning to stay however, and new patterns are being established.

In the 1990s, as manufacturing industries moved into rural communities, manufacturing job growth

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*Immigration is changing the face of rural America, and employment in the food processing industry is a major draw to the rural Midwest. This article compares perceptions of economic strain, community concerns, community services, and nutritional well-being between long-term community residents and Hispanic immigrants in three rural Nebraska meatpacking communities. Several patterns emerged. Long-term residents reporting greater personal economic strain also reported poorer nutrition and those reporting more concern with community issues (e.g., language barriers) also reported greater difficulty obtaining community services (e.g., food assistance, affordable housing). Immigrants reporting greater economic strain also reported more concern with community issues and poorer nutrition.*

was faster in rural than urban areas. Between 1989 and 1994, rural counties added a net of 167,000 manufacturing jobs, while urban counties lost 1.2 million manufacturing jobs. Jobs are being created in rural areas at unprecedented rates. The dominant manufacturer in the Midwestern States is the meatpacking industry.

Many of the jobs in the meatpacking industries are labor intensive and unpleasant (e.g., slaughtering and packaging cattle, chickens, and hogs). Immigrant laborers will often accept these positions and work double shifts and overtime, which few U.S.-born people would do for comparable wages. Laborers average \$12,000-\$16,000 annually, enough to minimally support a family. Thus, more families and fewer single males are migrating into Midwestern communities. Between 1980 and 1992, the number of Hispanics in 10 Midwestern States—Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota,

Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, and Wisconsin—rose from 1.2 to 1.8 million, while the White population in the same States declined by 400,000.

## Community Impacts of Rapid Demographic Change

Immigrants are often perceived as a mixed blessing; their arrival adds to the population and labor supply, and the economic benefits from a growing industry are widely evident. Yet, population growth can tax a community's ability to provide housing, education, health care, and welfare services, and often results in a heightened sense of racism and more incidents of discrimination. Immigrant workers and their families report discrimination, denial of services (e.g., housing), police harassment, and pressure to assimilate. Teachers often lack Spanish-speaking skills, and hence immigrant children can miss the full benefits of public education. Community residents com-

plain that immigrant children's needs compromise the quality of the schools. Three rural meatpacking communities in Nebraska were chosen to survey perceptions of economic strain and community concerns among immigrant laborers and long-term residents.

**Schuyler** is in Colfax County, Nebraska, and has a population of 4,720. Between 1990 and 1995, the county population grew 11 percent, mostly from people moving to Schuyler for work in the Excel Beef Packing Plant. The plant has been operating in Schuyler since 1984.

In 1990, a \$24-million modernization of Excel's Schuyler and Dodge City (Nebraska) plants began.

Approximately 70 percent of the Excel employees in the Schuyler plant are Latino. Fifteen long-term residents and 13 immigrants were interviewed from Schuyler. All long-term residents were White, non-Hispanic (table 1a); 5 immigrants were Mexican and 8 were Latino (table 1b). Most (n = 11) long-term residents had lived in Schuyler for more than 20 years. Immigrant participants lived in Schuyler an average of 5.5 years.

**Norfolk** is in Madison County, Nebraska, and has a population of 23,500. Beef America closed its doors in its Norfolk plant in 1998. At the time, approximately 90 percent of its employees were Latino. Iowa Beef Processing acquired the structure and the plant was re-opened in 1999. Approximately 60 percent of its employees are Latino. Thirty individuals, evenly divided between long-term residents and immigrant newcomers, were interviewed from Norfolk. All long-term residents were White, non-Hispanic; 7 immigrants were

### Survey Questionnaires

The economic strain survey consists of 25 questions designed to assess participants' perceptions of personal/familial financial strain. Respondents answered questions based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (almost always). Sample questions included "How often do you and your family experience money problems?" and "How often are you able to put money away for future needs?" Response scores were re-coded as necessary so that higher scores indicate greater financial strain.

The **community concerns** survey asked respondents to indicate, on a 4-point Likert scale, their level of concern from 1 (not concerned) to 4 (definitely concerned) over 17 issues including alcohol use, drug use, teen use of alcohol, family conflict, spouse abuse, child abuse, marital conflict, gangs, unemployment, economic well-being, teen parenting, single parenting, adult education, youth education, housing, interethnic conflict, and language barriers.

The community services survey asked participants to indicate, on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (not difficult to obtain) to 4 (very difficult to obtain), accessibility of 17 different services including medical care, dental care, hospital care, quality child care, after-school care, jobs for adults, job training, language development, weekend activities for youth, recreational facilities, counseling services, domestic violence intervention services, police protection, affordable housing, transportation, financial assistance, and food assistance. Higher scores indicate greater difficulty in obtaining services.

The **nutritional well-being** survey was comprised of 15 questions about the respondents' nutritional intake in the previous 3 months. Participants responded to the first 6 statements using a Likert scale ranging from 0 (don't know) to 3 (often true). Sample statements include "I worried whether our food would run out before we had money to buy more," and "We relied on only a few low-cost foods because we were running out of money to buy food." Questions 7 through 10 concerned the adequacy of food over the previous 3 months with regard to hunger and weight. If respondents indicated some degree of food insecurity, they continued with questions 11 to 15 (e.g., "In the last 3 months, did your child/children ever skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food?"). Higher scores on this survey indicate poorer nutritional well-being.

Finally, the **community assessment** questionnaire, presented only to long-term residents, consisted of 33 questions, such as "To what extent do language barriers affect community functioning?" and "To what extent does the community understand and accept the cultural patterns of the immigrant newcomers?" Respondents answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (almost always). Response scores were re-coded so that higher scores indicate a more positive assessment of the community.

Table 1a

**Personal information: Long-term community residents**

Variable	Schuyler (n=15)	Norfolk (n=15)	Madison (n=15)	Total (n=45)
Age:				
Mean	54.7	44.0	44.7	47.8
Range	33-76	23-71	36-78	23-78
Ethnicity:				
White	15	15	15	45
Marital status:				
Single	0	1	0	1
Married	11	12	14	37
Divorced	2	2	1	5
Widowed	2	0	0	2
Residence:				
Own home	14	13	13	40
Rent home/apt.	1	2	2	5
Education:				
Mean (no. years)	13.7	14.6	13.5	13.9
Range	12-16	12-16	12-16	12-16
Children:				
Mean (no.)	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	4	2	8
\$20,000-\$30,000	5	1	2	8
\$30,000-\$50,000	4	4	7	5
> \$50,000	2	6	3	11
Time in community:				
1.0 - 6.0 (Years)	1	1	2	4
6.1 - 10.0	1	1	0	6
10.1 - 20.0	2	4	3	9
> 20.0 years	11	9	10	30

Source: Hatch Survey (Dalla, Cramer, and Stanek, 1999).

Mexican and 8 were Latino. The majority of long-term residents (n = 9) had lived in Norfolk more than 20 years; an equal number of immigrants had lived in the community 6 years or less.

**Madison**, 25 miles south of Norfolk, is the county seat of Madison County. It has a population of approximately 2,300 individuals. The Madison Foods pork processing facility was constructed

in 1973 and is operated by IBP. The plant employs 1,000 people, approximately 65 percent Latino or Mexican. More than 60 percent of the approximately 220 students at Madison Elementary School come from Spanish-speaking households, up from 30 percent in 1996. Thirty individuals were interviewed from this community, evenly divided between long-term residents and immigrant newcomers. The aver-

age age of long-term resident participants was 44.7 years; immigrants averaged 33.7 years. All long-term residents were White, non-Hispanic; immigrants were Mexican (n = 10) and Latino (n = 5). Most (n = 10) long-term residents had lived in Madison for more than 20 years; most immigrants (n = 14) had lived there 6 years or less.

A total of 88 participants were interviewed at length by the principal investigator or a graduate assistant. Individuals completed a series of survey questionnaires (in English or Spanish) on economic strain, community concerns, community services, and nutritional well-being (see "Survey Questionnaires"). Long-term residents completed an additional community assessment survey.

### Patterns of Similarity Across Respondents and Communities

**Schuyler.** Long-term residents rated their communities highly. They also reported more community concerns (e.g., language barriers, interethnic conflict), but greater ease in obtaining community services such as medical assistance and adult education than did Schuyler immigrants. Those residents and immigrants reporting greater concern with community issues reported much greater difficulty in obtaining community services. Schuyler immigrants reporting greater economic strain also reported poorer nutritional well-being. Compared with long-term residents, immigrants experienced (1) significantly greater economic strain, (2) significantly greater difficulty obtaining community services, and (3) poorer nutrition.

**Norfolk.** Long-term residents responded similarly to long-term residents in Schuyler. Specifically, a positive community assessment

was significantly related to fewer communitywide concerns, greater economic strain was significantly associated with poorer nutrition, and greater concern with community issues was significantly related to greater difficulty obtaining community services. However, additional patterns emerged in Norfolk. Among long-term residents, greater

economic strain was significantly related to (1) more concern with community issues (e.g., language barriers, interethnic conflict) and (2) greater difficulty in obtaining community services. Finally, greater concern with community issues was significantly related to poorer nutritional well-being among all residents.

Among Norfolk immigrants, greater economic strain was related to (1) more community concerns and (2) poorer nutrition. (Nutritional well-being was also related to community concerns.) Simply put, those with greater financial strain expressed greater concern regarding community issues and poorer nutrition. Each of these patterns was also significant among Norfolk long-term residents, implying similar perceptions between the immigrant and long-term resident groups. However, group comparisons (table 2) revealed significantly greater economic strain among the immigrants than the long-term residents.

*Madison.* Long-term residents with a more positive assessment of the community reported greater ease in obtaining community services (a pattern also found among long-term residents in Schuyler and Norfolk). Those reporting greater economic strain reported significantly more concern with community issues (e.g., language barriers) and significantly poorer nutrition. Finally, long-term residents showing greater concern with community issues reported significantly greater difficulty in obtaining community services.

Immigrants in Madison reporting greater economic strain also had significantly more concern with community issues and significantly poorer nutrition. Group comparisons revealed significantly greater economic strain and poorer nutrition among immigrants than reported by the long-term residents of Madison.

Table 1b

**Personal information: Immigrant participants**

Variable	Schuyler (n=15)	Norfolk (n=15)	Madison (n=15)	Total (n=45)
Age:				
Mean	34.4	41.9	33.7	36.6
Range	18-69	22-67	22-51	18-69
Ethnicity:				
Mexican	5	7	10	22
Latino/a	8	8	5	21
Marital status:				
Single	5	1	1	7
Married	7	9	12	28
Divorced	1	4	2	7
Widowed	0	1	0	1
Residence:				
Own home	3	4	11	18
Rent home/apt.	8	8	3	19
Friends/relatives	2	3	1	6
Education:				
Mean (no. years)	9.2	8.9	8.5	8.9
Range	4-14	4-15	4-14	4-14
Standard deviation	3.8	3.6	3.2	3.5
Children:				
Mean (no.)	3.5	4.6	3.1	3.7
Range	0- 4	1- 2	1-6	0-14
Annual income:				
< \$10,000	1	5	0	6
\$10,000-\$20,000	3	6	4	13
\$20,000-\$30,000	5	4	8	17
\$30,000-\$50,000	5	0	2	7
Time in community:				
1.0-3.0 (Years)	4	6	6	16
3.1-6.0	4	3	8	15
6.1-10.0	3	4	1	8
10.1-20.0	2	2	0	4

Source: Hatch Survey (Dalla, Cramer, and Stanek, 1999).

Table 2

**Survey information: Responses to survey questions**

Community/topic	Mean		Range <sup>1</sup>		Standard deviation	
	Resident	Immigrant	Resident	Immigrant	Resident	Immigrant
<b>SCHUYLER:</b>						
Community assessment	3.49	-----	2.9 - 4.1	-----	.36	----
Economic strain	2.04	2.32**	1.4 - 3.5	1.2 - 3.3	.61	.66
Community concerns	3.01	2.87	1.7 - 3.9	1.2 - 4.0	.54	.80
Community services	2.04	2.50	1.3 - 2.6	1.5 - 3.8	.41	.74
Nutritional well-being	1.01	1.19*	1.0 - 1.1	1.0 - 1.5	.69	.20
<b>NORFOLK:</b>						
Community assessment	3.41	-----	2.4 - 4.2	-----	.51	----
Economic strain	2.18	2.90*	1.4 - 3.1	2.0 - 3.6	.56	.54
Community concerns	3.08	3.05	2.1 - 3.9	1.5 - 3.9	.58	.71
Community services	2.16	2.23	1.2 - 3.4	1.2 - 3.6	.54	.73
Nutritional well-being	1.56	1.74	1.4 - 2.0	1.4 - 2.2	.19	.23
<b>MADISON:</b>						
Community assessment	3.35	-----	2.5 - 4.1	-----	.40	----
Economic strain	2.10	2.72*	1.5 - 3.0	1.7 - 3.8	.45	.57
Community concerns	2.86	2.80	1.5 - 4.0	1.0 - 4.0	.66	.93
Community services	2.23	2.19	1.5 - 3.8	1.1 - 3.5	.64	.68
Nutritional well-being	1.03	1.27*	1.0 - 1.2	1.0 - 1.8	.80	.30

Source: Hatch Survey (Dalla, Cramer, and Stanek, 1999).

\*p &lt; .05; \*\*p &lt; .01 (Asterisk indicates significant differences between resident and immigrant responses to survey questions).

<sup>1</sup>Possible scale range 1-4 on all surveys except community assessment (1-5) and nutritional well-being (1-3).

### Implications for Policymakers, Educators, and Social Service Providers

Consistent patterns emerged in all three communities with regard to economic strain, community concerns, community services, and nutritional well-being. Interestingly, patterns of response were similar for both long-term resident and immigrant participant groups. Simply stated, long-term residents and immigrant newcomers appear more alike than different. Community concerns often derive from trouble with accessing services; nutritional well-being is often compromised by economic strain. And this occurs across the board. Immigrant influx into rural meatpacking communities often

results in heightened interethnic tension, thus reducing the potential for collaboration and partnership development. Helping rural community residents, regardless of cultural or ethnic background, acknowledge similarity may promote unity and mutual problem-solving in addressing like concerns.

In both groups, economic strain was consistently related to poor nutrition and greater concern with community issues. The first pattern (i.e., economic strain and poor nutrition) makes intuitive sense. Those with less discretionary income are more likely to limit their diets, to purchase less expensive foods, to forgo more expensive items, and to cut meal size or skip meals.

The second consistently significant pattern, the association between economic strain and community concerns, is more difficult to interpret. Perhaps those with fewer economic resources, regardless of community tenure, are more likely to seek social services (e.g., financial assistance), thus becoming more aware of community problems due to contact with others in similarly vulnerable positions. It is equally likely that those living on a limited income or suffering financial hardship live in neighborhoods near families of similar economic means and that community needs (e.g., adult education, affordable housing) are more evident.





Photo courtesy, Economic Research Service, USDA.

Results of this investigation are significant for policymakers, educators, and social service workers alike. First, immigrant participants clearly experienced greater economic strain than long-term residents. Adult education and employment training services are needed to assist immigrant laborers in obtaining higher paying positions. Second, nutritional deficits were reported particularly by immigrant laborers. Workshops offered onsite (that is, at the packing plants where many immigrants are employed) and in Spanish may promote nutritional well-being among immigrant laborers and their families.

Finally, immigrant laborers and their long-term community counterparts reported remarkably parallel perceptions of community status as it related to individual welfare. Education focused on mutual needs (e.g., budgeting, job training), community concerns (e.g., child education and adolescent drug use) and goals (e.g., individual and family well-being) may bring diverse cultural groups together in communities struggling with rapid demographic change. [RA](#)

#### For Further Reading . . .

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