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New Immigrants Settling In Rural America, Carsey Report Finds

Report Uses County-Level Census Data To Document Immigrant Movement Beyond Gateway Cities

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DURHAM, N.H. – More immigrants are bypassing traditional gateway communities such as Chicago, New York, and San Francisco in favor of settling in rural areas—and their impact is acutely felt in these small communities.

A new report from The Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire finds that employment opportunities in food processing, textiles, and small manufacturing are drawing Hispanic immigrants to rural communities, sometimes increasing small-town populations more than tenfold. Because rural populations are small to begin with, even a small number of immigrants can have a big impact both demographically and socially. The new residents can strain community resources, creating tensions, but they also can reinvigorate dying communities.

“Immigration is often viewed as an urban experience,” says Cynthia Mildred Duncan, director of The Carsey Institute, “and while urban areas are still a first stop for the majority of immigrants, more and more are bypassing cities altogether and choosing smaller, rural communities, where the cost of living is lower, streets are safer, and work is steady. Immigration policy should not overlook this shift. Rural communities clearly need more support in absorbing these new residents.”

The Carsey Institute report, “New Immigrant Settlements in Rural America: Problems, Prospects, and Policies,” by Leif Jensen, Professor of Rural Sociology and Demography at Pennsylvania State University, finds that during the 1990s, Hispanics accounted for more than 25 percent of the total growth in rural areas. In many communities, the influx of Hispanic immigrants is the only factor counteracting an aging workforce and exiting youth.

Rural communities in the Southeast, Midwest, and South are the most common destinations. In the Southeast, the draw is jobs in agriculture, lumber, poultry processing, and furniture manufacturing:

- In Duplin County, N.C., the immigrant population increased nearly tenfold during the 1990s, from roughly 500 to 5,000.
- In Atkinson County, Ga., 17 percent of the population is Hispanic and the immigrant population grew nearly tenfold during the 1990s, from 93 to 895.

Vast swaths of the Midwest are rural, and meatpacking and food processing enterprises have attracted large numbers of Mexican immigrants:

- A Cargill hog processing plant in Cass County, Ill., employs some 2,300 workers, one-third of them Latino. The Hispanic population has grown from 41 to 1,049 over the 1990s.

- Nobles and Watonwan counties, Minn., have experienced five- to sixfold increases in immigrant populations.
- Other areas with large immigrant population growth include Dawson County, Neb., and Finney County, Kan.

The meatpacking industry is also important in the South:

- Yell County, Ark., is 13 percent Hispanic with an economy based on poultry, hog, and beef processing. Its recent immigrant population grew 12-fold.
- A Pilgrim's Pride plant in Titus County, Texas, accounts for a tripling of immigrant population there.

Seven of the eight rural counties in this area are more than 50 percent Hispanic.

The immigrant population in rural America differs in some important ways from recent immigrants overall, and from those found in cities. The study finds that rural immigrants are:

- primarily Mexican,
- mostly married with stable families,
- skilled in telecommunications, construction, vehicle repair, assembly, etc., but lack formal education (half have not completed high school),
- working (65 percent are employed), but not making a living wage,
- more likely to own their own home,
- less prone to receive food stamps,
- more likely to have access to health insurance than their urban counterparts.

The effects on rural areas must be at the forefront of immigration policy debates, the report concludes. Their smaller size and more limited resources make them vulnerable to pressures from immigration.

"This report reminds us that rural communities are struggling to adapt to sudden population changes, but that these changes can be a good thing—if they're given the tools and supports to handle the influx," says Duncan.

Copies of the report are available by contacting Amy Seif at The Carsey Institute, 603-862-4650 or by visiting <http://www.carseyinstitute.unh.edu>.

The Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire conducts research and analysis on the challenges facing rural families and communities in New Hampshire, New England, and the nation. The Carsey Institute sponsors independent, interdisciplinary research that documents trends and conditions affecting families and communities, providing valuable information and analysis to policymakers, practitioners, the media and the general public. Through this work, the Carsey Institute contributes to public dialogue on policies that encourage social mobility and sustain healthy equitable communities. The Carsey Institute was established in May 2002 with a generous gift from UNH alumna and noted television producer Marcy Carsey.