



Will State and Local Crackdowns Prevent Immigrants from Fitting In to American Society?

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In recent years, immigrants to the United States have stopped clustering near the border. Millions have spread out to work and build family lives in cities and towns across the United States. Of course, unauthorized immigrants have long had to cope with their disadvantaged legal status. But starting in 2005, many state and local governments – from Arizona and Texas to Georgia and Pennsylvania – passed their own tough laws, meant to drive unauthorized immigrants away.

Some laws block access to public universities, while others try to discourage parents from sending children to school or authorize police officers to request immigration papers from anyone they might “reasonably suspect” to be an unauthorized immigrant. The most draconian measures make it illegal for U.S. natives not only to hire unauthorized immigrants but also to rent property to or even “harbor,” “shield,” or transport them. This affects even citizens and legally resident family members and friends of the unauthorized. Public health or safety can also be put in jeopardy – for example, if families with unauthorized members fear any contact with the police or even the local health department.

Do tough measures prevent newcomers from fitting into American society? Scholars who study immigration often ask how smoothly immigrants “assimilate” to their new homes. That is, how long and how difficult is the journey to living and working just like native citizens and earlier arrivals in the new homeland? Full assimilation takes several generations, so it is not easy to pinpoint short-term obstacles. Nevertheless, my research on rural southern communities helps me to highlight ways that recent crackdowns may be unnecessarily fracturing communities and blocking the previously ongoing incorporation of newcomers.

Promising Developments before the Crackdowns

In 2003 and 2004 – before the most recent crackdowns – I went back to my home region in eastern North Carolina to see what was happening with Hispanic newcomers. I interviewed hundreds of authorized and unauthorized immigrants born abroad as well as U.S. citizen Hispanics born here; I also interviewed white and black Americans who were interacting with them in workplaces, public schools, law enforcement agencies and courts, and local politics. Some of what I learned wasn’t pretty. But I observed three trends that made me cautiously optimistic about the prospects for newcomers, even for those without proper papers.

- *Economic assimilation and mobility.* Most Hispanic newcomers, including low-wage workers in food processing plants, were earning some economic security, and some even moved up the ladder a bit. Some economic progress was possible even for people without proper papers. They were joining the rural working class, not languishing in a marginal underclass. New immigrants to eastern North Carolina were, in fact, having an easier time joining the local rural “mainstream” – assimilating to the lifestyles of natives around them – than would have been the case if they lived in a more affluent area like San Francisco, New York City, or even Charlotte.
- *Little experience of racial exclusion.* Hispanic newcomers, including lower-class and unauthorized ones, described their social relationships with American natives as generally positive, or at least neutral. Notably, Hispanics did not yet feel excluded as a group, or report experiencing the all-encompassing racial discrimination so characteristic of African Americans’ experiences in the region.
- *Welcomed into local society and politics.* In my research during the pre-crackdown period, I observed native citizens in a variety of local institutions doing quite a bit to reach out to Hispanic newcomers, even unauthorized immigrants, and advocate on their behalf. Committed schoolteachers were mentoring Hispanic students, and a few were trying to surmount obstacles and get their “star” unauthorized pupils into college. Committed healthcare providers were searching for novel ways to deliver care to Hispanics who didn’t have health insurance or the transportation, legal status, and

money needed to gain access in the usual ways. Several law enforcement officers were also taking extra steps to protect unauthorized Hispanics who feared deportation if they reported petty theft or domestic violence. Public servants like these were doing the real grunt work to help immigrants fit in, even when state and local politicians were opposed or not interested.

The Harm Restrictive Laws Can Do

Despite the positive trends I saw, my research also revealed the burdens restrictive federal laws placed on Hispanic newcomers – and thus suggests how recent state and local crackdowns may further undermine immigrant assimilation. Federal laws against hiring unauthorized immigrants made it much harder for them to find or keep jobs, which in turn hurt their families economically – including children who are full U.S. citizens. Many Hispanic newcomers felt that these restrictions stigmatize the authorized and unauthorized alike, as undeserving outsiders. Legal exclusions of unauthorized people fettered professionals and civil servants, too – telling them what they could and could not do. For example, a local police chief wanted to hire a new bilingual Hispanic deputy, but laws requiring applicants to be naturalized citizens prevented him from following through. Similarly, many teachers considered all children to be “their students,” but a few questioned the Supreme Court ruling that unauthorized children should have equal access. Such doubters might respond to more restrictive state and local policies.

My research suggests that post-2005 state and local restrictions have created new obstacles to immigrant economic progress and amicable community relations. Although most new laws are directed specifically at unauthorized immigrants, they also have negative effects on U.S.-born children and legal Hispanic residents. Restrictions similarly undercut the good work of local public, private, and nonprofit leaders trying to protect vulnerable people and build stronger communities. Integrating immigrants to the United States is a two-way street. It requires cooperation from newcomers, but also welcoming efforts from host communities. Restrictive state and local laws undercut constructive progress and make it harder for newcomers to fit in.

Read more in Helen B. Marrow, *New Destination Dreaming: Immigration, Race, and Legal Status in the Rural American South* (Stanford University Press, 2011).