

WHY IMMIGRATION WORRIES AMERICANS – ESPECIALLY RURAL RESIDENTS

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The United States may be a nation of immigrants – yet those already here recurrently worry about later arrivals. Outcries against immigrants go all the way back to Colonial times. Prejudice against Asians and eastern and southern Europeans peaked in the decades around 1900. Today, attitudes are more accepting, yet surveys regularly register close to majority opposition to increased immigration. Between 1990 and 2000, the foreign-born population of the United States grew by 57 percent, while the ranks of the native-born increased by only 13 percent. Calls for restrictions on new entries and crackdowns on immigrants have become loud and frequent.

Not all Americans feel the same way, however. To assess varied attitudes, my colleagues and I have surveyed available polls and used data from a 2004 national survey of U.S. adults to look closely at views about immigration among rural, urban, and suburban residents. Respondents were asked whether they think there are too many, too few, or about the right number of immigrants in the United States; whether immigration is good, bad, or makes little difference; whether legal immigration should be increased, decreased, or kept the same; and whether the federal government is too tough, not tough enough, or about right in handling immigration.

Who Worries the Most and Supports Tougher Measures?

Older adults, individuals without a college degree, and those who are most concerned about national economic conditions are more likely to believe that there are too many immigrants in the United States. People's political leanings and convictions also play a role. Social conservatives are more likely to support restrictive immigration policies, as are adults who question multi-cultural definitions of American society. Especially important are beliefs that immigrants are costly to the country, and the conviction that immigrants have less socially desirable characteristics than people born in the United States.

Americans living in cities generally have more positive attitudes toward immigration than those living in suburban or rural areas. Rural residents are much more likely to have the social characteristics and beliefs that lead to wariness about immigrants among all respondents: on average, rural people are older, less educated, and more conservative. In addition, city-dwellers may have more contact with newcomers, although more and more immigrants have moved to the suburbs. Rural U.S. communities are the places least likely to have large numbers of immigrants. Yet quite a few small towns in the South and Midwest have experienced sharp changes since meat and poultry processing plants began recruiting less-educated Latino, African, and Asian immigrants as low-wage employees. Family members followed, shifting the look and texture of local life.

Social contact can reduce fear and prejudice, but only when people work closely together, collaborate to achieve common goals, and form friendships. Residential and workplace segregation, language barriers, and differences in education and social class can stand in the way such that negative stereotypes may actually be exacerbated. Even in a small town, native residents may feel threatened by the arrival of immigrants who work at distinct jobs and live in a separate part of town. Newcomers may seem like a burden, especially if schools, hospitals, and police forces were already operating on tight budgets. Of all the factors that explain rural-urban differences, the strongest is the widespread belief among rural residents that immigration is costly.

The Views of People in Minnesota

To probe feelings more deeply, my colleagues and I turned to personal interviews and focus group responses from Minnesota, which has many newcomers in cities, suburbs, and rural communities. In rural focus groups, hostility toward immigrants and the belief that there are too many in the community was strongest among low-income, white residents who worry that they face competition for jobs and believe that foreign residents have access to undeserved benefits. As one rural man put it, “they shouldn’t be treated better than we are. We’re the ones that are payin’ for what they’re gettin’.”

Suburban dwellers can also highlight perceived unfairness. “The groups are getting very large,” one middle-aged woman said. “They get all this help... and those of us who have fought for this country, who have paid our taxes...are the ones...paying for all those people to get all those breaks.” In an era of rising health costs, tight local budgets, and stigmatization of “welfare,” many are incensed at the notion of benefits for newcomers.

Positive Signs for the Future

Many rural and suburban residents have positive relations with their foreign-born neighbors and do not support restrictive immigration policies. In communities across America, there are examples of public programs and civic groups working to foster collaboration and inclusion. Policy makers who wish to accelerate these trends would do well to highlight the economic and cultural benefits of immigration and debunk myths about exaggerated costs and misperceptions of negative immigrant traits. Rural communities, especially, may need special efforts to correct misconceptions, build ties, and buffer the costs of including newcomers.

This brief draws on findings in Katherine Fennelly and Christopher Federico, “Rural Residence as a Determinant of Attitudes toward U.S. Immigration Policy,” *International Migration* 46, no.1 (2008): 151-190, and uses data and quotes from Fennelly and Helga Leitner, “How the Food Processing Industry is Diversifying Rural Minnesota” (Julian Samora Research Institute, 2002).