



THE IMMIGRANT POPULATION IN NORTHWEST ALABAMA: BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract: *According to the 2010 U.S. Census, Alabama experienced a 145% increase in its Hispanic population and has become the top state for immigration settlement in the last decade. The primary purpose of this article is to gain information about the lives and struggles of Hispanic immigrants residing in the three counties of Lauderdale, Colbert, and Franklin in Northwest Alabama. The article examines the systemic barriers and discrimination faced by Hispanic families, and identifies the opportunities and strengths, social activities, and community supports that aid their integration into the new communities. Utilizing a community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) framework, the study uses a mixed methods approach, combining community informant interviews, focus groups and a small scale survey. It is hoped that the findings from the study will be valuable to community leaders and service providers to build partnerships, facilitate cultural understanding, and develop a set of best practices and research approaches that will lead to the social inclusion of this at-risk population.*

Keywords: *immigration, demographic shift, discrimination, social transformation*

1. Introduction

In recent years, the United States is experiencing a tectonic shift in its population composition from a largely white, domestic born, Anglo-Saxon, English speaking and Christian, to a burgeoning immigrant, foreign-born, non-white, ethnically and religiously diverse one. Nowhere is this shift being more clearly felt than in southern United States. This is particularly evident in states like Alabama where the Hispanic population increased by 145% and has become the top state for immigration settlement in the last decade (U.S. Census, 2010a).

The primary purpose of this article is to gain information about the lives and struggles of Hispanic immigrants residing in the three counties of Lauderdale, Colbert and

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Franklin in Northwest Alabama, an area that has witnessed an explosion in this population in the last fifteen years. The article examines the systemic barriers faced by Hispanic families, and identifies the opportunities and strengths, social activities, and community supports that aid their integration into the new communities. For the purpose of this paper, the term ‘immigrant’ is used to broadly refer to people who migrated to and currently reside in the United States, and is inclusive of people who are considered foreign born, undocumented, legal permanent residents and naturalized citizens; the term “Hispanic” is used for persons of Latin American ancestry in accordance with the U.S. Census.

2. Immigration and Demographic Change: A Brief Overview

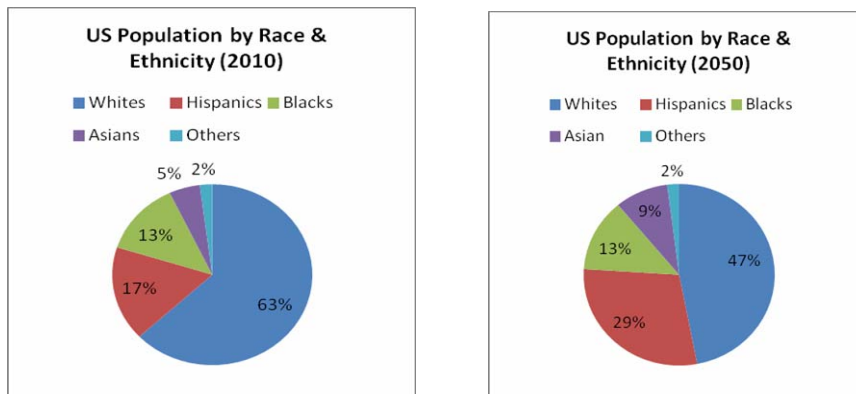
A study of Immigrant demographic data reveals that the groups of population welcomed or barred from entering the United States follow the pattern of US Immigration policies through different periods of history (Martin & Midgely, 1999). Early legislation such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Japanese Exclusion Act of 1924 reflected the blatant racism towards these groups, while favoring northern and western Europeans (Hurh & Kim, 1989). A major shift in Immigration policy occurred with the Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments of 1965 which established a preference system based on family unification. This Act also allowed skilled workers to enter the United States to meet the labor needs of the growing economy, and imposed ceilings on immigration from the western hemisphere. As a result, this period witnessed a rise in immigration from other regions, particularly Latin America, Africa and Asia (Kochar, 2005; Carlson, 1994). On account of the new immigration policies of 1965, the Refugee laws of 1980, amnesty programs for certain groups of unauthorized alien workers under the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA), and the Immigration Act of 1990 which increased admission allocation for highly skilled immigrants, the demographic and ethnic make-up of the country has become increasingly diverse (Immigration Policy Center, 2012). Post 9/11, 2001, immigration laws, however, have seen a resurgence of anti-immigrant sentiment as demonstrated by the collapse of the latest immigration reform attempts in the United States Congress in April 2013.

In the early 1990s, Alabama enjoyed the benefits of successful industrial recruitment through tax incentives and public subsidies that attracted multinational automotive companies including Mercedes, Honda, Hyundai and Toyota (Economic Development Partnership of Alabama, 2007). This period also witnessed the expansion of lower wage industries such as construction, agriculture, hospitality and poultry packing. The newly created low-wage, low skilled jobs resulted in a rapid surge in the Hispanic population who moved to fill in the jobs created by the new economy. Thus, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2007, when the rest of the country was experiencing an unemployment rate of 4.6%, Alabama’s rate stood at an all-time low of 3.4% (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007). Additionally, the housing bust experienced by the rest of the country did not affect Alabama. However, by 2010, the recession hit and Alabama’s unemployment rate doubled to 10.7 % (Small Business Plan, 2010).

Moreover, on April 27th 2011, devastating tornadoes in central and north Alabama, including the counties under study, killed 240 people, decimating communities, home, schools and workplaces (Addy & Ahmed, 2011). In the face of this natural devastation at a time of economic recession, immigrant communities bore the brunt of the anti-immigrant sentiments from local communities and opportunistic politicians. On June 9, 2011, the newly elected Alabama governor signed Immigration Law HB 56, due to have taken effect on September 1st, 2011, described as a crackdown on “illegal” immigrants and a “jobs” bill to boost employment. However, the bill was temporarily blocked by the Supreme Court as discriminatory in the face of protests and lawsuits by the Department of Justice, the Alabama American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and several other civic, community and religious groups (Liptak, 2013; American Civil Liberties Union, 2011).

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, Hispanics are the largest ethnic minority groups in the U.S., representing 16.4% of the U.S. population, totaling 50.5 million and projected to reach 102.6 million or 22.5% by 2050 (U.S. Census 2010b). Table 1 below illustrates the changing demographics of this nation:

Table 1: Changing Demographics in the United States



(Passel & Cohn, 2008. Retrieved August 16, 2013, from <http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/reports/85.pdf>)

According to the 2010 Census, Alabama is the top state for immigration settlement, accounting for 92.1% growth between 2000-2010, followed by South Carolina at 88% and Tennessee at 82% (U.S. Census 2010c). In 2010, the Hispanic population in Alabama increased by 145%, accounting for 3.5% of the total population. Despite being an important destination, Alabama is one of the top five states with the highest percentage of the Hispanic population living below the poverty rate at 31.2% in 2011 (US Census, 2013). In addition, a comparison of the poverty rates between the Hispanic community and the non-Hispanic white community reveal stark disparities in their socio-economic status, as demonstrated in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Comparison of Poverty Rates between Hispanic and Non-Hispanic Whites 2011 in Alabama

	Hispanics	Non-Hispanic White
Poverty Rates (17 and younger)	47%	17%
Poverty Rates (18-64)	27%	13%
Home Ownership	49%	77%
Health Insurance (Uninsured)	44%	12%
Annual Personal Earnings	\$18,000	\$30,000

(Pew Hispanic Center. 2011a. Retrieved September 16, 2013 from <http://www.pewhispanic.org/states/state/al/>)

All of these factors make it imperative to highlight the needs and challenges of this community that serve as a barrier in their full participation in American society.

3. Review of the Literature

A review of the existing literature on the Hispanic immigrant population in the United States portrays the significant contributions of this group to the economy and cultural life of the community, as well as the disparities they face in health access and outcomes (Coffman et al., 2007; Documet & Sharma 2004); impact of various U.S. policies on undocumented immigrants (Becerra et al., 2012; Cleaveland, 2010; Finch et al, 2001); income and use of public resources (Gerst & Burr, 2011; Center for Immigration Studies, 2001), and psychological distress (Basta et al, 2008; Thoman & Suris, 2004). Chaudry and colleagues (2010, 13) reported serious risks to children from parent-child separation due to deportation. The Pew Hispanic Center reports that six in ten Hispanics live under the constant fear that they or a close friend or family member will be deported (Pew Hispanic Center, 2011b). Substantial evidence links discrimination to poor health and acculturation stress among immigrants and children of immigrants (Ayón, Marsiglia, & Parsai, 2010; Ding & Hargraves, 2009). Umana-Taylor and Updegraff (2012, 725) associated underemployment with lower life-satisfaction among immigrants, particularly during times of economic recession. Mattingly, Smith and Bean (2011, 1-5) further found that underemployment is exacerbated in rural communities where opportunities are already scarce. Commenting on the needs of Hispanic immigrants, Strug and Mason (2002, 70) recognize that many immigrants are dependent upon access to a variety of services to aid their adaptation to their new countries.

Despite the wealth of literature about immigration, very little data exists on the socio-demographics of new communities in the different regions of the United States. Moreover, studies on the immigrant population in the isolated areas and rural counties of Alabama, some of which were devastated by the deadly tornadoes of April 2011, are practically non-existent. Building on prior research, this study attempts to narrow this gap by exploring the experiences and documenting the lives and struggles of the Hispanic immigrants living in this area. The contribution of this article lies in its raising awareness of the experiences of Hispanic immigrant families residing in Northwest

Alabama with respect to their traditions, culture, challenges and needs in their pursuit of a better quality of life.

4. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the current analysis is guided by the blended use of two major participatory research models for working with communities: the community-based participatory research model (CBPR) and the participatory action research (PAR) model. Developed by Minkler and Wallerstein (2003), CBPR's focus on community capacity building and systems development utilizing a partnership approach between researcher and participant lends itself well to the study. The second model, participatory action research (PAR), developed by Paulo Freire (1982) has its roots in Latin America and calls on academic communities to use investigation and intervention to address issues of social injustice on behalf of oppressed populations. Utilizing the community-based participatory action research approach, the author fostered a process of data collection that focused on findings that are participatory and evidence-based, with the goal of social transformation (Reason & Bradbury, 2006).

5. Research Methodology and Data Collection

This exploratory cross-sectional study was conducted over a three month period in the summer of 2012. A University grant allowed the researcher to hire a first-generation Hispanic student who is also a resident of the community under study. This enabled the researchers to gain access to the homes, social and religious events, and personal lives of the participants, build trust, and thereby gain better insight into the world of the informants. It also allowed the researchers to gain access to other key stakeholders in the community including business owners, priests and community organizers such as leaders of the Northwest Alabama Hispanic Co-coalition.

The study used a mixed methods approach utilizing community informant interviews, focus groups and a small scale survey. The methods of data collection involved: (1) desk research, involving an analysis of the relevant literature and US Census data regarding immigration history, trends and policies; (2) establishing community linkages that build on local partnerships including representatives from the local Hispanic community and other local stakeholders for identifying barriers and approaches to meet locally identified needs. Purposive and snowball sampling procedures were used to locate potential individual and focused small group discussion participants. Promotional flyers in Spanish and English were circulated in Mexican grocery stores, churches, restaurants, and through community leaders; (3) a two page survey in Spanish and English was designed and disseminated to gather data; (4) an in-depth key-informant interview guide was utilized. The research assistant was trained by the principal investigator in research protocol in order to promote consistent data collection procedures. Approval from the University's Institutional Review Board was attained preceding data collection to obtain informed consent and protect confidentiality.

Participants

Individual, in-depth interviews were conducted with thirty Hispanic residents in the three counties. Participants were composed of 12 men and 18 women, aged 18 – 64 (average age 36 years). Their lengths of stay in the US ranged from 3 months to 32 years. All of the participants were given pseudonyms. The interviews took place between May and September 2012 and lasted between 30 – 90 minutes. 22 interviews were carried out in Spanish and 8 in English. In keeping with the bio-ecological perspective, several factors were identified at multiple levels of the ecology - individual, family, social, community - to get a multifaceted portrait of immigrant lives. Questions explored concepts of migration, social situations, community networks, and everyday life. 120 surveys in Spanish and English were administered to gather data. In addition, five small focus group interviews were conducted with key informants consisting of community leaders identified by the researchers. Open-ended interviewing and participant observation was used to solicit the viewpoints of the participants, which allowed for open discussion and dialogue.

Data Analysis

A systematic approach was used to manage and analyze the data derived from the surveys, in-depth interviews and focus groups to protect the validity and reliability of the results. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and maintained in both Spanish and English. Qualitative analysis of data was conducted based on grounded theory principles which utilize the process of open coding and use of observer comments outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990). The content analysis was completed in two stages: open and axial coding. Codes were developed across common themes to form a comprehensive picture of participants' collective experiences. The axial coding focused on the connections between the categories and subcategories such as the barriers and challenges faced by the participants, and factors that promoted their integration into their new communities. The lead researcher completed the content analysis, carefully reviewing transcripts for interpretations and clarifications.

6. Findings and Discussion

While traditionally Alabama has not been one of the gateway locations for immigrants to the United States, the three counties under study have witnessed an explosion in the Hispanic population in the last fifteen years, as illustrated in Table 3 below:

Table 3: Percentage Change in the Hispanic Population in the three counties under study:

	Colbert County			Franklin County			Lauderdale County		
	1990	2000	2011	1990	2000	2011	1990	2000	2011
Hispanic Population	187	618	1,212	101	2,316	4,830	313	894	2,224

	Change from 1990	Change from 2000		Change from 1990	Change from 2000		Change from 1990	Change from 2000
Hispanic Population Change	431	119		2215	120		581	142
Percentage Change in Hispanic Population	230%	11%		2193%	3%		186%	7%

Pew Hispanic Center (2011c). *Colbert County 2011*. Retrieved Aug 07, 2013, from <http://www.pewhispanic.org/states/county/1033/>
Pew Hispanic Center (2011d). *Franklin County 2011*. Retrieved Aug 07, 2013, from <http://www.pewhispanic.org/states/county/1059/>
Pew Hispanic Center (2011e). *Lauderdale County 2011*. Retrieved Aug 07, 2013, from <http://www.pewhispanic.org/states/county/1077/>

The neighboring agricultural communities and local informal labor market sector such as factories and restaurants provide many unregulated work opportunities for individuals. In addition, a meatpacking plant that actively recruits Hispanics as well as its low cost of living, dependable wages, temperate climate along with the presence of family members, relatives and other fellow immigrants all make it an attractive destination.

The surge in the immigrant population has resulted in a transformation of the local small town economy with the opening of new businesses such as restaurants, ethnic grocery stores, beauty parlors, bakeries, and small landscaping enterprises. The increase in Hispanic families has led to higher enrollment in the public school system, resulting in increased federal funding for schools. In addition, local businesses have thrived from the consumer practices of the Hispanic community who not only buy for their own usage but often send goods such as televisions, clothes, and other household items to their native countries. Participants also reported that they regularly send back remittances to their families, which benefit both countries. Moreover, all immigrants pay income and sales taxes that further support the local economy, leading to an increase in state and local revenues. Thus, the increasing Hispanic population not only stimulates the state and local economies but also provide a needed pool of unskilled labor for the workforce. At the same time, the influx has resulted in a population that is largely impoverished, often working in the fringes of the economy, characterized by low wages, minimal education, lack of transportation, substandard housing, and social isolation.

The demographic change occurring in these small towns and communities in the study pose barriers as well as opportunities for both new and local residents. Some of the barriers are identified below:

a) Economic and Financial Barriers

The majority of participants work in low paying jobs that require minimum language skills such as landscaping, restaurants, chicken processing plants, and meatpacking,

restaurant, hotels, hospitality and related occupations, janitorial, housecleaning and maid services, food processing, agriculture and farm labor, construction, and light manufacturing. Participants reported that they found jobs through individual networks and worked mainly as day laborers. Jobs are divided clearly among gender lines with most female respondents working as maids and waitresses, while the males predominantly worked in construction, janitorial and landscaping services. Not only is the Hispanic population dependent on these jobs, these industries are equally dependent on the Hispanic population for their labor.

At the other end of the spectrum are the over-qualified Hispanic immigrants – skilled, educated and talented. However, their education and skills are not recognized in the United States where they are often forced to accept low-wage jobs. For example, one of the participants in the study was a lawyer in his native Guatemala but without English language skills and non-recognition of his degree in the United States, he has been confined to work in his nephew's restaurant. This loss of valuable qualification is a loss to the local community which might have potentially benefitted from a worker with global skills. Hispanic workers are known for their loyalty and strong work ethic. However, the majority of the participants in the study expressed the existence of a glass ceiling with very low opportunities for job mobility as they are often passed over for promotion in favor of natives which negatively affects their job satisfaction.

English as the only language spoken at banks and financial institutions is a barrier to starting a small business and results in a number of related problems. Participants expressed that immigrants, particularly those newly arrived, do not always understand how credit works and find it difficult to obtain credit needed to purchase homes and other essential consumer goods. The absence of a credit record also makes it difficult to start a small business. Not having social security cards prevent many from taking advantage of credit and banking opportunities. There is a general distrust of banks, compounded by the absence of bilingual tellers; they may not know how to open bank accounts or be able to show all required documents as bank deposits and other paperwork are written only in English. Minimal knowledge about economic issues and policies such as workers' rights, and worker's compensation benefits if injured on the job, lead to further financial losses. Underpaid and uninformed, with usually no work benefits, low wages, poor working conditions, and child care issues, Hispanics remain chiefly at the bottom rung of the labor force.

b) Lack of Access to Adequate Healthcare

Participants in the focus groups revealed that language issues, lack of transportation, lack of insurance, and inability to pay for services are common barriers in accessing health care services. 82% of the participants did not have a primary care physician and do not receive any preventive health care. Most of them tended to get help from the informal support system such as "curanderos", folk healers or medicine men. They tended to visit a free clinic, doctor or emergency room only in extreme need and generally as a last resort. Most of their jobs do not have any health insurance and other benefits, and most are often not informed about health insurance by employers. Legal immigrants are barred from enrolling in Medicaid or the State Children's Health

Insurance Program (SCHIP) during their first five years of residence in the United States. Language is a major barrier at hospitals and doctors' offices where there are generally no translators; in cases where they are available, there is a lack of trust due to perceived discrimination. Participants expressed that they often experience confusion related to treatment options, insurance discrepancies, incorrect prescriptions, and sometimes misdiagnosis. In addition, they face several emotional and mental health challenges which include anxiety, depression, family conflict, and the stress of learning to live in a new culture. Underutilization of mental health services is a major problem among participants in the study who reported that they rarely sought help for such issues and often were left to deal with it on their own.

c) Lack of Access to Quality Education

Education is a deep-seated value in the Hispanic culture and the reason many families chose to immigrate to the United States is to provide a better education for their children. However, participants expressed that education of their children is a challenge for most Hispanic parents. Parents reported that their children often have difficulties performing at their grade level, lag behind in reading, and do poorly on standardized tests. Many observed that teachers tended to ignore Hispanic parents despite their children's failing grades and other problems in the classroom.

Children themselves experience stereotypes from teachers and peers alike which impacts their learning, social life and interaction. Shortage of resources in public education leads to a general lack of bilingual personnel in schools and school district offices. Lack of bilingual guidance counselors, and at most times, only one bilingual teacher in the entire school system add to the difficulties already faced by Hispanic children. In many first generation immigrant families, parents often have to rely on their children to serve as interpreters not only in reporting their own progress in their schools, but also for other services such as doctors' offices. This places children in the precarious position of not only missing school days but also receiving information which may not be entirely appropriate for their age. High school seniors in the study believed that many guidance counselors discriminate against Hispanic children by often not sharing information regarding colleges, scholarships and other advice which is commonly shared among native students. Lack of scholarships and financial assistance is a barrier as college is out of reach for many due to cost. College students also reported that their past experiences with prejudice complicated their campus life and often made them reluctant to seek advisement or support for academic and financial issues. Describing the barriers in accessing English speaking classes, adult participants reported that they are too tired to focus on classes after exhausting twelve hour days. Often the location of the classes, timing, child care and lack of transportation serve as major barriers. While many immigrant parents are highly educated, many lack English skills and earn low incomes.

d) Barriers Related to Transportation

The lack of public transportation options poses a serious barrier for Hispanics in the area. This is compounded by the difficulties experienced in obtaining a driver's license.

The requirement in Alabama to possess a Social Security card is a huge obstacle in acquiring a driver's license, especially for the undocumented. This is further exacerbated by language barriers where the study materials such as the Drivers' Manual and application forms are in English. Acquiring a license often involves repeated visits to the Department of Motor Vehicles due to misinformation and/or misunderstanding of correct documents, often resulting in loss of wages for both the applicant as well as their ride. The lack of bilingual employees and translators at the Department of Motor Vehicles along with problems understanding directions during driving tests often lead to many failing the test. The lack of transportation affects all aspects of their life as they are not able to commute to English classes or access health care, workplace and credit facilities.

e) Poor Communication and Language Barriers

A majority of the participants felt that unfamiliarity with Hispanic culture and lack of functional bilingualism is a major source of settlement adjustment problems. The Hispanics in the study are a heterogeneous group, with 75% of the participants having roots in Mexico, while others are from Guatemala, Ecuador, El Salvador and Honduras. Language barriers are a major challenge, not only between Hispanics and Americans but also within various Hispanic cultures. While majority share Spanish as a common language, 32% speak native Indian languages and may not have full understanding of Spanish. Participants expressed tensions between service providers and clients as it often resulted in incomplete and ineffective service provision. It is a basic barrier to employment and job skills as they are unable to obtain information on laws, regulations, and rights as employees.

f) Social and Political Issues

The extent to which immigrants are able to adapt to their new country and community is related to socio-economic as well as political factors such as length of time in the United States, age at time of migration, educational attainment, religious affiliation and ability to visit one's native country. As far as age is concerned, younger immigrants in the study expressed their ability to adapt more easily to the new culture; older immigrants experience greater life satisfaction but also expressed that they faced greater discrimination. From a multicultural perspective, all immigrants, regardless of documentation status, experience acculturation stress. Many expressed the lack of extended family as well as their inability to visit their home country led to minimal social and emotional support and increased their sense of loss. Poor language skills, work-related stress, and constantly having to adapt to new surroundings exacerbated assimilation issues. Lack of adequate social outlets, such as a community center for Hispanics to go for information and recreation, add to the social isolation. Challenges of living in a hostile environment include exclusion, loss of social roles in the new country, parent-child conflict, and lack of a support system, all of which have a negative impact on cultural adaptation, sometimes resulting in depression and suicide.

While Hispanic immigrants face many challenges in their adaptation to their new country, they are also a resilient group which can be attributed to their faith, family,

household structure and social networks. 80% of the participants in the study come from married-couple households with children and extended relatives. Children of immigrants are mostly birthright citizens, although many live in mixed-status families. Participants who were single were more likely to live with extended family or with a group of other individuals, generally of the same gender rather than individual apartments. 75% of the key informants reported that holding multiple jobs and living in larger households with many wage earners enable them to make ends meet and keep them out of poverty. These family structures provide a safety net for the households during times of hardship as well as social and emotional support to its members. Nutrition programs such as school lunches and breakfasts appeared to be the most commonly used programs. Since most of the participants work in low skilled, low wage jobs, they feel they are able to function relatively well without English skills. However, in situations which call for transactions with the outside world such as doctor's offices, employment agencies, banks and schools, key informants reported that they often face hurdles and stereotypes in explaining their situations. Discrimination was also reported as a key barrier for these workers to find employment in other fields during times of job loss.

Lack of knowledge of legal rights is another major barrier. For example, key informants expressed that when arrested for a traffic violation, they are often unaware of their rights. Voting rights of immigrants are also often not exercised; lack of time and language skills often result in low voter turnout as well as low participation in the political process.

g) Discrimination

Like class, sex and race, immigrant status is deeply ingrained in the ethos of the American mind. While earlier Blacks were perceived as the most discriminated group in the United States, Hispanics are now perceived as most subject to discrimination. Participants reported that they are often not compensated for overtime work and do not express their voice for fear of losing their jobs. Although some face sexual harassment in their jobs, many female respondents expressed that they do not complain for fear of retribution or deportation. Lack of knowledge of laws and policies leads to fear of authorities and serve as obstacles in pursuing justice. In the area of housing, participants reported discrimination by landlords who often did not prefer to rent to Hispanics, or charged higher rents when they did. Dearth of adequate and timely repairs was reported to be a chronic problem for many renters. Participants expressed a pervasive perception of being profiled based on stereotypes of what an "illegal" looks like, either by being pulled over while driving, followed in stores, poor service in restaurants, banks and other public services. Lack of awareness of immigration policies resulted in paranoia in the wake of the new immigration laws. There was a surge in traffic stops and arrests resulting from not carrying documentation such as passports and other identification. Many faced anti-immigrant sentiments as well as fear from previously supportive employers and community members, children were kept home from school, and many abandoned their homes and workplaces, resulting in an exodus of people in the area. One in ten participants expressed being asked about their immigration status by prospective employers and police officers regardless of their

place of birth. There was also the recognition that translation and cultural issues sometimes led to misunderstandings. All these barriers become even more precarious for the undocumented immigrant and their families who suffer from additional problems of discrimination from their own community, constant threat of deportation, and no legal protection which leaves them open to exploitation.

Opportunities and Strategies for Change

The research findings from the study reveal the following opportunities and strategies for change.

Strategic planning on the part of city officials is vital to prepare for on-going demographic change in Northwest Alabama. Career Centers with bilingual staff available through local community colleges could assist educated Hispanics with workforce readiness. Banks should ease restrictions on loans and credit to encourage entrepreneurial Hispanic community members to expand existing businesses or start small businesses such as shuttle vans and taxis. Local chambers of commerce need to assist Hispanics with writing grants at federal and state levels to start small businesses.

There is a dire need for competent health services that are easily accessible, have flexible hours, combine physical care with mental health care, address comorbidities, and are staffed by compassionate professionals. Since the vast majority of the immigrant population work in the low-wage service sector economy with no healthcare benefits, there is a need for low cost health care alternatives with focus on a continuum of care such as free or low-cost community health clinics. Bilingual translators in area hospitals and access to the same doctor at each visit to increase trust would enhance the quality of care.

At the macro level, education cuts need to stop to make additional resources available to meet the pressing needs of the Hispanic population from scholarships and internships for Hispanic students to bilingual instructors and cultural awareness training. Within the public school system, programs such as the Language Partners program need to be enhanced and enforced to help Hispanic children better integrate into the Alabama school system. Cross-cultural training for school administrators and teachers would help bridge the cultural gap. Key informants spoke about the need for adult language and literacy programming and creative time, location and delivery methods to enhance learning. Hiring bilingual home educators to go into Hispanic homes to teach literacy skills and offering more ESL (English as a Second Language) classes in locations and hours convenient for participants are imperative to bridge the language gap. High school seniors voiced their need for mentoring programs from their guidance counselors and additional assistance with college applications. Active mentoring of Hispanic college students through programs such as one-on-one advising would help increase retention rates and ensure academic success. Higher educational credentials and relevant work experience attained in native countries should be taken into consideration through programs such as foreign degree evaluations funded and conducted by United States education accrediting agencies.

Respondents noted that assistance in obtaining the Social Security card would be essential to overcoming obstacles to get a driver's license, credit, access to employment,

and healthcare. Alabama could follow the example of some states such as Utah where immigrants can obtain a driver's license without a social security card. Improved communication would greatly enhance the assimilation experience of immigrants in the area. Public service agencies such as the Department of Motor Vehicles, banks, hospitals, libraries, and police should hire bilingual employees. Official documents and forms should be written in both English and Spanish.

Outreach efforts for Hispanic newcomers such as a dedicated Center for the Immigrant Community supported by the city council and staffed by “cultural brokers” - one bilingual and bicultural staff who know the local community - would send a welcoming message for new immigrants. Creating a Hispanic-affairs staff position at state and local levels to increase representation would create cultural bridges. Free classes on topics such as the expectations of community citizenship, information about how to find housing, a doctor or legal services, instructions about how to register children in school, how to access necessary immunizations, and use of car seats would ease the transition to a new culture. Workshops and distribution of materials that detail information, in easily understood terms, about the role of police, health care workers and schools in American society, location of public services and other community resources would help cultural assimilation. Successful outreach includes physically going into the community to service clients in their places of residence (neighborhoods, apartment complexes); worship (faith institutions); and education (schools). Systematic follow-up and monitoring of outreach initiatives need to be implemented along with better coordination and communication between service providers to minimize overlap.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined the barriers and opportunities faced by the Hispanic immigrant population residing in the three primarily rural counties of Lauderdale, Colbert and Franklin in Northwest Alabama. Like the rest of the United States, and the state of Alabama, the three counties in the study have experienced an unprecedented growth in the Hispanic population over the last decade, a trend that is expected to continue into the future. Utilizing the community-based participatory action research model, with its emphasis on community capacity building, an exploratory cross-sectional study was conducted in the three counties. The study used a mixed methods approach, conducting five small focus group interviews with key informants, thirty individual, in-depth interviews with community residents, as well as the administration of 120 surveys. The use of community-based settings familiar to the participants increased their level of comfort, facilitated data collection, and allowed the researcher to engage in meaningful discussions in identifying barriers and opportunities at both the individual and systems levels.

The findings of this study highlight the fact that demographic changes brought about by immigration pose opportunities as well as challenges for many small, rural communities. The study illustrates that the barriers faced by the Hispanic community in the three counties are both universal and specific. Participants overall reported positive experiences of their stay in the United States. They were appreciative of the better financial opportunities available. However, also evident were differences along class

lines, especially the differences due to documented or undocumented status of the participants. Besides the more universal needs such as better employment, improved transportation, quality education, and better healthcare access, the top needs specific to the population under study include language proficiency, cross-cultural competency, accessible service location, and better communication and coordination between service providers. Service providers practicing with immigrant clients must not only be aware of their basic needs, family relations and acculturation challenges, but also be sensitive of the negative impact of stereotypes on the physical and emotional well-being of their clients. At the macro level, they must work with communities to raise cultural awareness of Hispanic immigrants through activities such as information sessions and cultural events that bring members of all communities together. Service providers must also play an active role in educating their Hispanic clients regarding their constitutional rights and responsibilities to eliminate civil rights abuses. In addition, local service providers should be sensitive to the unique attributes of the Hispanic heritage. Knowledge of the language, understanding of cultural differences, and advocacy for policy changes that humanize and empower immigrants are needed to provide effective and culturally competent services. Strategic planning on the part of the state's leaders and county officials to prepare for the demographic shift is similarly vital.

A major limitation of the study is related to the relatively small sample size of the communities in which the study was conducted. Future research should try to replicate the process in communities with larger immigrant populations to reflect the needs of more recent and diverse groups of immigrants, and further validate the effectiveness of the participatory strategy. There is also a need for future studies to focus on the impact of immigration in small rural communities and their role in providing an open and welcoming environment to its new residents. Finally, more research is needed to understand the characteristics of this vulnerable group in order to develop appropriate localized strategies to address barriers grounded in the beliefs, values and norms of Hispanic culture.

In conclusion, the study provides insight into the barriers and opportunities faced by Hispanic immigrants as they work to improve their life circumstances. Building on previous literature, the study highlights the value of the community based participatory approach in its ability to document the lived experience of participants within their cultural and social contexts. In addition, the study discusses opportunities and strategies for change for the state's leaders, county officials, and service providers to act in a timely and concerted fashion to prepare for the demographic shift. Such measures will not only meet the needs of the new immigrant population, but will create more equitable access to resources, better utilization of services, and thereby benefit the small towns and communities in which they live, work and make vital contributions to the local economies.

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