



Immigration Experiences in New Settlement Communities of the Midwest

Journal:	Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education
Article Title:	<i>Immigration Experiences in New Settlement Communities of the Midwest</i>
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Volume and Issue Number:	<i>Vol. 12 No. 3</i>
Manuscript ID:	123029
Page Number:	29
Year:	2009

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Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is published three times a year (Spring, Summer, and Winter) by the Center for Social Work Research at 1 University Station, D3500 Austin, TX 78712. Journal subscriptions are \$110. Our website at www.profdevjournal.org contains additional information regarding submission of publications and subscriptions.

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ISSN: 1097-4911

URL: www.profdevjournal.org

Email: www.profdevjournal.org/contact

Moving Around to Get By and Try to Get Ahead: Immigration Experiences in New Settlement Communities of the Midwest

Corinne Valdivia and Anne Dannerbeck

The predominant economic theories that guide our free market economy postulate that unimpeded labor movements provide a benefit to the employers and employees alike. They allow labor to move to where their services are most valued and provide a mechanism for employers to identify the workers best suited for the job. Immigrants embody this notion of free flowing labor. Most come to the United States in search of a better life than they can attain in their sending communities, but are they reaping benefits from their mobility? Once in the United States, Latino immigrants, especially, tend to move around from one community to another, from one job to another within a community, and within a place of employment from one position and salary level to another of higher status and pay.

The body of research on immigration has addressed the forces that pull immigrants into certain communities, with new job opportunities being the main attraction. But once in a community, how do newcomers get by and, most importantly, how do they get ahead? This study seeks to fill this gap in knowledge by examining the mechanisms that impact the upward mobility of Latino newcomers. Many Latino immigrants end up trapped in low paying jobs in agriculture and agriprocessing, and do not experience upward mobility. What forces hold them there? An assumption is often made that years of work experience translate into better paying, higher status positions (Hagan 2004). That may not be the case with the current generation of immigrants. A study of income and mobility, using regression analysis with 2000 census data from non-metro Missouri, separately analyzed foreign- and native-

born Latino adults. Mobility (having moved in the past five years) had a negative effect on income of foreign-born individuals and a positive impact on those born in the United States (Dozi and Valdivia 2008). Most such studies have considered what factors are associated with upward mobility in job status and income but have not examined the mechanisms that impact this mobility, as viewed through the lives of individual immigrants.

The study is part of a three-year project to understand how Latino immigrants get by and get ahead in three new settlement communities in the Midwestern United States. In the last decade, immigrants have spread out from their traditional settlement areas along the southwestern region, as well as Florida, New York, California, and Chicago. While migrant labor has long been an element of the rural agricultural economy, the increasing number of meat and poultry processing plants has attracted newcomers to rural, new-settlement communities, places which had not previously experienced an influx of foreign-born workers. Many of these newcomers are Latino, particularly of Mexican origin.

Evidence is mounting that the community itself, in the form of the context of reception, may play a major role in determining the extent to which immigrants experience upward mobility. The context of reception is the welcome mat that newcomers encounter in the community. The nature of the labor market, resident attitudes towards newcomers, immigration policies, and the availability of networks providing links to resources shape the environment that receives newcomers and impact their ability to get by and get

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ahead. At the same time, newcomers are not passive in the settlement process. Their human capital and unique family characteristics, including their cultural identity, impact their settlement experience (Portes & Rumbaut 2001; Valdivia et al., 2008).

Besides education and experience, previous research has examined the impacts of country of origin on the ability of immigrants to move up in the labor market. Nativity is often used as an explanatory variable for upward mobility, with Mexicans accounting for the largest group of immigrants in United States history. They are typically categorized as documented/undocumented, rural/urban, married/ single (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994) and male/female. The findings of most research conclude that they are uneducated, at a severe disadvantage in an English-speaking society, and destined to remain at the bottom of the economic sphere (Morgan 2003). They are generally assumed to have a low level of educational attainment and to resist assimilation into mainstream society because of their continued connection with their sending communities via travel and communication networks. When immigrants are grouped by nationality, they tend to be ranked at the bottom of economic well-being indicators (Bean, Leach, & Lowell 2004). However, aggregating people based on nativity is an approach that has been criticized as it may bias study results to the advantage or disadvantage of an entire population. Understanding more about the individual experiences of people within a group may better inform our understanding of mobility mechanisms.

We have chosen to focus on female immigrants because of a dearth of research on immigration from their unique perspective (Hill 2004). Other research has found that their reasons for immigrating differ from that of their male counterparts, even within the same family (Davis & Winters 2001; Cerrutti & Massey 2001). They often start in very low-paying jobs but tend to improve their economic status faster than immigrant men (Bean, Gonzalez-Baker & Capps 2001). Because women tend to have different roles, rights, and responsibilities in the household, their experiences in the U. S. labor market may be

different than those of men. As they gain familiarity with the U. S. labor market and job opportunities, they may change jobs to get ahead. To understand job mobility patterns, immigrants need to be disaggregated from their country of origin, ethnic grouping, and other general categories (Bean & Stevens 2003). Females from Mexico, for instance, may have less previous job experience than those from other countries. In Mexico, one study found that 87% of men compared to 29% of women were employed (Pagán & Sanchez 2000). This study aims to inform the analysis of mobility patterns by examining individual experiences and strategies that impact upward mobility.

The women in this study, primarily of Mexican origin, are settling in three communities in a Midwestern state. The communities and the immigrants are both diverse, and purposely selected for their characteristics, as we also need to understand the community context of reception and how it impacts the settlement process. Community characteristics, including job opportunities, may impact both immigrants' ability to be upwardly mobile and how they see themselves in the settlement process. The first community contains one main employer for the immigrants, a poultry processing plant. The community is also a county seat and thus has some government jobs as well. Before the arrival of the processing plant and the active recruitment of Latino laborers, the community was perceived as being very homogeneous. The second community includes a wide array of manufacturing plants offering employment opportunities. It has historically had a more diverse population. It is located near an important highway that crosses the U.S. from east to west. The third community has developed around the hospitality industry and thus has a different array of employment opportunities, marked by a preponderance of seasonal job fluctuations.

The information reported in this paper comes from in-depth interviews. Preceding these interviews, focus groups were held in each community to better understand the settlement processes experienced by Latino immigrants. In addition, photo voice projects were conducted in each com-

munity to visually capture how the newcomers were experiencing the communities. Each of these information sources will in turn, inform the development of a household survey of livelihood strategies of a broad array of immigrants in the three communities. The information will be used to inform policy and practice to help communities take advantage of the opportunities offered by the influx of a group of individuals who are settling down and establishing roots.

Methods

This component of the overall project used the case study approach to capture the breadth of immigrant experiences in the three communities. The study focused on the livelihood strategies of immigrants who had been in the community for various lengths of time. An interview guide structured a discussion about moving to the new settlement community, the adjustments made, and how the interviewee felt about the entire process. Questions did not follow a particular order but were based on the flow of the conversation. This approach allows the interviewee to play a lead role in the research (King 2004).

In identifying the participants for the case studies, the aim was to get a representative sample based on the known characteristics of the Latino immigrant population in a Midwestern State. The aim was to recruit primarily people who were part of a family unit and from Mexico, because approximately 70 percent of the non-metropolitan immigrants in this state were of Mexican origin, and 66 to 95 percent of households in selected non-metro counties were families (Valdivia, Dozi & Zapata 2006). Analysis of the Census data showed that women who participate in the labor force in non-metro areas earn less than men (Valdivia et al. 2008) thus it was important to capture the experiences of both genders. Another recruitment aim was to interview equal numbers of men and women.

These criteria were shared with the community gatekeepers who are trusted by immigrants. They assisted in identifying the subjects for the case studies. In each community a variety of recruitment strategies were employed. In two communities, churches were the gatekeeper organizations,

and church members who work with the Latino community assisted with the selection of interviewees. The third community has a center that serves Latinos; staff from this organization identified potential participants according to the guidelines provided.

Interviews were conducted in Spanish, in locations where the interviewee would be comfortable. Settings included private homes and the Latino community center. The interviews were conducted after two other project activities had been completed in each community, which helped reduce concerns about sharing sensitive information, such as disclosing documentation status, and border crossing experiences.

Interviews were conducted by a bilingual team of male and female university faculty and students, who had relevant cultural knowledge about the target population. The team was trained in interviewing skills. They were provided with a set of open-ended questions and a checklist to ensure that all themes were being addressed. A script was developed designed to disclose the purpose of the study, to assure those being interviewed of confidentiality, and the protection of the information.

The interviews followed procedures established by the University Institutional Review Board. The rights of the participant were reviewed before the session. Participation was voluntary, and no incentives were provided. Participants expressed a willingness to participate as a way of helping others and as an opportunity to voice their experiences in the United States. Oral consent was obtained. Furthermore, participants were informed of a certificate of confidentiality obtained from the federal government to protect the identity of subjects from federal officials. As our work developed in these communities from 2007 to 2008, the political climate created an increased sense of insecurity, which impacted the openness that we had experienced at the beginning of the project. The heightened sense of insecurity required that the interviewers spend more time gaining the trust of participants and ensuring them that their participation was confidential. As an added measure of protection, we are not identifying the communities by name in any pub-

lications.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English. Both the Spanish and English versions of the transcripts were read and coded for factors related to labor mobility where mobility includes movement between communities, between jobs, and within a job locale, between positions. The principal themes included the reasons the individuals came to the community, the process of moving and settling into the community, how they were getting by/meeting their basic needs, and how their move had impacted their economic success.

Once we had identified passages related to these major themes, we conducted the secondary level of analysis to identify mechanisms that impact mobility. We employed commonly recognized steps in qualitative analysis: data organization, coding within the broad themes, identification of categories within each theme related to challenges and coping strategies, core category consolidation, testing emergent understandings, exploring alternative explanations, and final analysis (Marshall & Rossman 1999, Merriam 1998). Results were compared to other research findings to assess the validity of the information (Lee 1999).

The co-authors, after agreeing upon initial coding categories, independently coded all interviews and then met to synthesize their findings. This approach was used to ensure the reliability and validity of the emerging analysis (Miles & Huberman 1984). Quotes are used to illustrate findings. Findings are reported using a previously established convention (Gomez et al. 2001; Shinnar 2007). The terms “most,” “generally,” and “the participants” are used when 7-8 of the interviewees responded in a similar fashion. When 5-6 of the interviewees responded in a similar fashion the terms “some,” “a number” and “tendency” are employed to describe responses. When less than 4 have responded in a certain fashion the term “few” is most commonly used to describe the response pattern.

Findings

A summary of the demographic characteristics of the women interviewed is presented in Table 1.

Just one of the women was not from Mexico.

The women tended to be married at the time they moved to the United States and those not married then, subsequently married someone in this country. At the time of the move, they ranged in age from 14 to 44. Although we have found no reason for the relationship, those from the first community all had a high school education, those from the second had an advanced degree, and those in the third had just an elementary level education. Most had worked before they moved. They tended to not have legal authorization to work in the United States. None of them were complete newcomers in the sense that the minimum amount of time any had been in the U. S. was seven years and in the community four years.

How the women arrived in rural, Midwest communities

Immigrants rely on their relationships with kin and friends to aid in the settlement process (Boyd 1989). Just as previous research has shown (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Massey et al. 1987), the women in this study had established social networks in the community where they settled. Every single person used their family network to move to the community. Parents, brothers, cousins, husbands, or aunts already lived in the community and helped them find jobs, housing, and to settle there.

A common theme in immigration literature is that individuals are motivated to move by a desire to seek a better life (Dion & Dion 2001). Such was the case for this group of women although how they defined a better life did vary. The reasons given included to get better (higher and more steady) wages and more work opportunities, to provide for the children, to live in a safer community, to gain access to high-quality health care, and to keep the family together after a period of separation.

The Process of Moving to and Settling in the Community

For some, the process of moving to the community was an event. For others it was more of an iterative process in which they became more and more committed to settling here as opposed to

Table 1: Case Study Participant Characteristics

Subject Code	Marital Status during movement	Age At time of move	Country of Origin	Years in the U. S./ community	Education At time of move	Nature of work Before moving	Documentation Status at time of move
M1	Married	24	Mexico	9/4	High school	Housecleaning	Unauthorized
M 2	Single mother	22	Mexico	7/4	High school	Receptionist	Unauthorized
M 3	Single	26	South America	30/7	High school	Secretary	Authorized Marriage visa
S1	Married	39	Mexico	10/7	University degree	Social work	Authorized
S2	Married	44	Mexico	11/11	University degree	Education	Unauthorized
S3	Married	25	Mexico	9/9	Technical degree	None	Unauthorized
B1	Single	14	Mexico	40/14	Elementary	None	Authorized
B2	Married	29	Mexico	10/5	Elementary	None	Unauthorized

Authorized indicates that entered the US with documentation for work. Unauthorized indicates that at the time of entering the U. S. the person did not have documentation that allowed her to work.

somewhere else. The literature has identified this phenomenon as stage migration (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1992). Most of the women (5 of 8) did not come directly from their sending to their receiving community and settle down right away. Some moved to various places around the United States, while others alternated between a place in the U.S. and their sending community. The most common reason for the iterative process was to determine a good community to live in before making a commitment to settle.

The other form of stage migration involved various family members coming at different times. Previous research has reported on this phenomenon. Suarez, Orozco, Todorova, and Louis (2002) show that 85% of children in their study had reported a separation and subsequent reunification. The arrival of the women took three forms: husbands coming first, the couple coming first and leaving children behind under the care of a family member or friend, and a single mother coming first. Eventually all were reunited with their family, including a single mother who left a child in Mexico for less than a year. The most common reason for the separation was to be stable and secure in the receiving community before

the family reunited, particularly in the case of children.

Once the move was made, finding a job took precedence. For some, the job search was short; they may have had a job arranged prior to arriving through a contractor or a family or a social network. Some found a job within a couple weeks of their arrival, often with the help of a social network. In one case, jobs were easily found at the processing plant because immigration enforcement had conducted a recent raid and many people had left. For others, the job search took longer, especially if they arrived at the wrong time of the year. Even though the women in the study and their families were not part of the migrant labor force, available employment opportunities were seasonal for some. One family arrived during the "bad season" (in this community the period when tourists did not visit) and could not find steady employment for their first three months.

Finding a job could be hampered by lack of English ability. As one woman explained, "It was more difficult to go to an interview and understand because when you go to an interview they tell you

something and when you don't know enough English, well you leave with the idea that they said one thing and you didn't understand well what they say and all of the rules that go with the job."

Even though the women encountered some difficulties in finding a job because of language limitations, everyone succeeded in finding work.

In one way or another the women all used family and social networks to help with finding a job. The networks ranged from the very impersonal -- a recruitment company -- to family and friends. These social networks were especially critical for those newcomers who did not have legal documentation or educational resources (Phillips and Massey 2000). One such woman, who arrived at the wrong time of the year for finding the typical job, relied on a friend of her sister to take her around and introduce her to potential employers. Through that networking she found a job. Others arrived without knowing anyone well and found countrymen to help them find jobs.

Once employment was secured, the women became more focused on adjustments to the community. They faced two primary challenges in settling into the community: a sense of isolation attributed mainly to cultural differences, and limitations associated with a small-town atmosphere. For the early arrivals, some of which occurred in the eighties, a challenge was being the only Latinos in the community. This situation manifested itself in a number of ways including lack of products from the sending country in stores as well as a more general feeling that, as one woman explained, "There wasn't really any of the things that you are accustomed to." Over time this sense of social isolation diminished as more immigrants settled in the area. Some of the women had a difficult time overcoming the social isolation of being a newcomer from a different culture even when other Latinos lived in the area. A primary reason was a lack of time and energy to make friends. They all tended to focus on their children and families and had few friends outside the family network. Even though most women had lived in the U.S. for several years, most did not speak

English, and those who did had an accent. This limitation contributed to their sense of isolation on a continuing basis. For some, not having legal documents meant a preference for not being seen, so they would not get into trouble. Their isolation was the most acute.

Quite a few of the women were originally from large metropolitan areas. Some had also spent time in large U.S. cities before coming to these new settlement communities. The small-town atmosphere made the adjustment process difficult. In the community with one main employer, a processing plant, the three women, who came from very different backgrounds, referred to the town as a small place. This appellation had a positive connotation in that it was quiet and good for the children, but also sometimes too small, because people knew too much about you and your life. For the undocumented woman, the smallness of the town led to a preference to be isolated to reduce the risk of being discovered. For the others, who are at different stages in their life, the feeling was still that it is a small place, one where all Latinos are referred to as Mexicans and where relations are not always good, even within the Latino community.

While lack of English skills was at first a major challenge for most in finding a job and in connecting to other people in the community, some discovered opportunities to learn the language. One became friends with a native speaker who offered to teach her. Others found help through their employers. Regardless of how much opportunity they had for formal English lessons, they struggled as adult learners to master the language.

Cultural barriers and associated feelings of isolation were overcome in a variety of ways. Two of the women married U.S. citizens, one before she came to the U.S. and the other after she arrived. Their husbands could serve as cultural navigators in the community and help them adjust. Curiously the attitudes towards the other culture and language differed, with one native-born husband seeking the culture and language of the wife, while the other did not. Another felt that her cultural adjustment was facilitated by her middle class background in her country of origin. She had traveled a great deal when she was young

and felt her broader exposure in the world helped her adjust to the community.

The process of settlement involves making the decision that this is the right community in which to stay. Having a job, family, and a social network consisting of countrymen and native-born people helped people to make that decision. For some, the decision was based on the desire to finally stay in one place as a united family after an experience of stage migration. The women recognized that moving again could have a negative impact on family relationships, and especially on the children. Those who had extended family in the community expressed reluctance to move again. Those who were more connected to their country of origin through family still living there and through the remittances they sent back seemed more willing to consider returning to their sending community.

Even though most of the women did not want to leave the community, they were still open to some mobility in the form of changing jobs. Some people changed jobs for higher wages. (Their experiences will be discussed more in the next section.) One woman who for many years had lived in the community and had a career switched jobs anyway after her children left home so that she would have a new challenge. Some of the women quit working to stay home with their children. Many of them had experienced periods of prolonged unemployment during pregnancy and in caring for young children.

Getting By and Getting Ahead

The way women in this group viewed their progress in upward mobility varied and was not necessarily a function of economic success. One immigrant was able to learn English and develop a career. A second woman, in spite of not speaking English, and after having worked in many low-skill jobs when she arrived, found a job as a social worker, the same career she had back in Mexico. The networks she developed with members of the receiving community allowed her to find a job where her skills were useful to others who spoke Spanish. A woman who migrated with financial resources and education was applying her skills in the business of a restaurant. Even

though her English skills were poor, her husband spoke English and could make the necessary connections in the community. Several women who had been in the cleaning business continued in that line of work and so did a couple of women working with meat processing. While not changing the nature of their jobs, they had a sense of improvement because they actually had more hours to work, or had received several raises over ten years of work. Most women saw themselves as getting ahead.

Some of the women had not experienced a significant change in their financial well-being since they moved to the community; they essentially were "getting by," covering the basic necessities of adequate housing and food. Other women and their families had made real progress. Not only did they have adequate income to cover the basics but they had been able to purchase homes, cars, and start businesses. One cited being able to take her children to a movie more frequently as evidence of getting ahead. Another focused on the ability of her children to settle independently from her as an indicator of upward mobility.

Besides income, another aspect of getting by or getting ahead relates to family structure and well-being. Those who were getting by tended to continue experiencing family separation or co-residential arrangements, which involved residing with people other than immediate family. As one said, "The most precious thing is the well-being of the family." A woman who had migrated without her child went back to get her after a short time. Her notion of well-being is described in the following passage:

"... If I have to be in this country, I want my daughter to be with me. If I am going to eat a plate of beans I want to share it with my daughter... At that time I knew I was illegal, and knew, or at least thought... If I am going to be here a month, a day, a year, whatever the time, I wanted that time to be me with my daughter by my side."

Even though having her daughter with her meant more economic struggles to just get by, family unification took precedence.

In one way or another all the women described their general experience in the new settlement community as “hard,” because of the struggles to just get by, separation from family and others from the same culture, and the physical environment, e.g., temperature extremes and sub-standard housing. Those who did not have documents faced the added fear of what could happen to their children, born in the U. S., if they would be deported.

“... Mainly fear, I cannot go outside because I am afraid that Immigration will find and take me away. That they find me with my children, one born in Mexico and one born here... And that fear that you live with in this country... They told us (the Mexican Consulate) that we had to have a letter (....) others had been captured and did not have a letter naming a family member that could pick up their children....”

Primarily it was hard for the women because of the barriers they encountered to achieving their goals related to getting ahead. The barriers included: language limitations, lack of educational opportunities, limited employment opportunities, and, if they had a job, the work environment and risk of injury, discrimination, concerns about legal status, lack of community organization to jointly work to overcome certain barriers, and remittance obligations, an element of having a family network.

Employment difficulties varied by community and by the associated type of employment available. In the community where the hospitality industry predominates, many jobs were very seasonal. The women described strategies to cope with the lack of full-time, year-round employment. In one family to maximize income and care for the rest of the family the husband and wife alternated schedules so that the woman worked during the day and the man at night. They then paid nothing for child care and received the benefit of higher wages for the night-time employment. Another family in this community received unemployment benefits during the off-season or what they referred to as the bad season. In the community dominated by the processing plant, workers are initially paid a low

wage. The longer they work the more they make, often because they work more hours. Employment opportunities exist year round but many people, including in the families interviewed, would quit to return to Mexico for an extended period. When they returned they had to start all over at beginning wage levels. In the community with more diverse employment opportunities, one of the families owned a restaurant. For a year, they tried to manage restaurants in two different communities but had no chance to rest and so they closed one down. One woman stayed in a low paying job that offered security rather than taking a higher paid but less secure job.

Limited English speaking ability can hinder one's chances of getting a job and creating a local social network, and it can also hamper the ability to get ahead. In one family where the wife did not speak English, the husband had been in the military. He was often deployed for extended periods of time. Because she did not speak English and they had two young children, the family was very isolated. The husband left the military, despite the job security, pay, and benefits, because his family could not survive without him in the community to navigate for their needs. The couple had to start over again outside the military.

Limited English was a barrier to getting a better job or promotion: “One is motivated to excel but how without anyone to help (with English)?” Another described the difficulties in being an adult learner of a new language, “You aren't ten years old, when everything stays with you.” Limited English proficiency also led to discrimination for those speaking with an accent, “My pronunciation is not very good. Sometimes when I think I am speaking well, Americans say, ‘What?’ Then my self-esteem is really low.”

Davila (2008) found that accents hinder one's ability to move upward in occupational status. Her subjects perceived discrimination resulting from their accents and felt that this impediment would never vanish. While the women in this study never reported that their accent was a source of job discrimination, some felt they were discriminated against at work in other ways, “We would go to work and they would look at us.” One felt the source of most discrimination at

work was a fellow countryman. He was the manager and had his favorites. If you weren't one of the favorites, you would get the less desirable work or fewer hours of work.

For some, being foreign born and part of a group who did not all have good documentation to allow them to work was a barrier to getting ahead. One woman did not work at all for fear that ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) agents would pick her up at work (even though she had proper papers) and her children would be left without a parent to care for them while she was in custody. That fear was enough to keep her from working and contributing income to the household. Another woman described being paid in cash for her work because she had been discouraged from filing her paperwork. As a result she could not have a bank account or cash checks and gain access to other financial resources. One of the women talked about the financial investment her family had made into getting their paperwork straightened out. They had paid thousands of dollars to individuals who were to help them but never did. All the women recognized that not having proper documentation was a major barrier to getting ahead and they all wanted to acquire the proper paperwork. For women, discrimination at work and lack of good documentation were barriers to moving up the pay scale.

Another issue for those working at processing plants was injuries. When the major employer was a processing plant and the work involved repetitive motion, carpal tunnel syndrome was a common complaint and hindered people from staying at the plant long enough to get a better job because, as one woman stated, "Everyone ends up with injured hands." Those working in the processing plants found it difficult to maintain employment long enough to receive wage increases and promotions. One woman felt that conditions at the plant could be improved if the workers would just organize and jointly ask for improvements. She felt that a major impediment to getting ahead was the inability or unwillingness for leadership to come forward and organize the group. If individuals requested better conditions, they risked losing their job.

Low wages contributed to difficulties in getting ahead but what really compounded the challenges were demands on the household income, especially if remittances were expected by the family network. One woman had a second family in her sending community that she continued to support with money for rent, food, and schooling for a daughter. Another sent money to an ailing family member who could not work. Some had homes in their sending community and had ongoing expenses for them. While some sent a consistent amount of money on a regular basis, others only sent some money when they had it to spare from their own household expenses. A few of the women sent no money back, either because the family had no need, or because the family had completely migrated to the U.S.

Despite the barriers, many of the women and their families managed to get ahead. For some it was a matter of trying harder than others. "If you don't try then you don't get ahead." Another compared the Latino work ethic to that of the native born, "Americans don't work like us. We work like burros." That work ethic and a strong motivation to succeed were factors in the ability to get ahead. Others included those all important social networks, experience with the U.S. labor market, training and education, excelling at work, taking a second job, family separation to pursue jobs, and mobility to go where opportunities were best for each individual. Most of the women also could cite facilitators that helped them to get ahead.

Some individuals used social networks to get information and to help them with any problems or concerns. Many formed new networks with coworkers and continued to maintain contacts with them even if they were no longer at the same job, because those networks helped them get better jobs. While informal social networks played a role in moving to communities and in settling in them, one sees some differences in the nature of the social networks in facilitating the process of getting ahead. In the early stages the networks tended to be informal, consisting of family and friends. In the getting-ahead process, one begins to see more reliance on formal networks in the form of community institutions such as banks.

Many of the women and their families had established a credit history by opening bank accounts and taking out small loans. Then they were able to get mortgages or loans to open a business. One woman, who was undocumented, stayed with the more informal network to get a loan, borrowing from a realtor to finance a home purchase. One family was able to buy more real estate and rent it out to expand their income earning possibilities.

While networks helped individuals get ahead, sustaining the family network and contributing to family well-being was another way to get ahead. Several of the women described work arrangements that were designed to minimize disruptions for the family. One woman explained that the family was experiencing continued separation because her husband had a better paying job in another community but her current job paid well so she did not want to follow her husband to that community. In addition, their children were settled in schools in the community and she did not want to disrupt them. Thus she felt the family was better off even though they continued to experience separation.

Many of the women had little education past secondary school, although one had earned a degree in the U.S. that allowed her to get a well-paid job. Another woman earned a professional degree in her sending community but could not use it in the United States without further education and English skills. None of the women with a high school education or less identified low educational attainment as a barrier to getting ahead. In contrast, the woman with a U.S. college degree talked quite a bit about how low educational achievement kept the immigrants and their children from becoming upwardly mobile. One woman explained that she has been able to move up in her job by learning more job-relevant skills. She was self-motivated to learn.

As some of the women gained more experience in the U.S. labor market and in a community, they discovered where to go for the best jobs in terms of pay, benefits, and the nature of the work. One woman was better off than some of the other immigrants at least in part because of her work experience. She had worked continuously from her late teens in professional jobs,

even in her sending community. Being positioned in a professional job gave her access to potential spouses with more income-earning potential. She married someone from the U.S. and eventually settled here. Because of her previous employment experience, the education she received here, and the social network she had through her U.S. born husband, she was able to move into a better paid, higher-status job. For most, getting ahead involved an iterative process, "step by step, you get ahead, not right away."

Using financial resources and economizing strategies constituted a second way to get ahead beyond job-seeking and income-earning strategies. In the beginning, when money was scarce, economizing strategies were used to get ahead. One strategy is co-residential housing to cut costs and save money. Chavez (1990) found that immigrants use such strategies for social support early in the settlement process. This group tended to use it more for instrumental support, that is, to have shelter and the means to share expenses. For some, house sharing lasted only for a couple of months while they searched for their own housing. For others, a co-residential arrangement with family members continued indefinitely. Another means of economizing was to watch food costs and eat tortillas and beans most of the time.

While all the women strove to get ahead, when they experienced success it sometimes came with costs, especially stress associated with insecurity, family separation, and concern about the long-term consequences of settling in a foreign country. Some of the women talked about their reluctance to go back to their sending community because they did not want to lose seniority at work or they were concerned about difficulties in the border crossing. They also talked about how hard it was emotionally to not go back. One talked about having fear all the time in the U.S. because she did not understand the laws and customs and was concerned about getting into trouble.

Discussion

This study examined the settlement patterns of Latino immigrants residing in three non-metropolitan communities in the Midwestern part of the United States, communities described as

“new settlements” because of the relatively recent experience of Latinos moving in to live and work in what had previously been fairly homogeneous towns. The study sought to understand factors that lead to upward mobility, the movement of labor from place to place and job to job, as well as the impact of mobility on individual and family ability to acquire the necessities of life (get by) and move beyond just the basics (get ahead).

The study has several limitations. The findings are derived from interviews with eight women from three communities. As such, the results may not be generalizable to other communities and across Latino immigrants. The cases are intended to understand a diversity of experiences in mobility to different places, purposely selected to represent communities with different pull factors. The sample was not entirely representative of the target population. All the women had spouses and children, not all at the time of migration, but all did when interviewed. The experience of single women and of those from other parts of the Americas may be different. Nevertheless the women did reflect a range of ages, education levels, time in the United States, countries of origin, and household composition. In addition, three of the women, one in each community, were getting by while the others were getting ahead.

Rather than lumping groups of immigrants together by nationality we have used the case study approach to capture variation in experiences. Across the eight women, there exists a variety of education levels, labor market knowledge, and discrimination experiences as well as some minor variation in country of origin. While not all the women and their families managed to acquire much more than the basic necessities, all lived in a stable, secure environment, and felt that their family well-being was better than in the past. They recognized that getting ahead was not just a material consumption goal. In one way or another all the women and their families saw themselves as getting ahead. If not materially, then at least they saw themselves upwardly mobile in terms of having a united family, a steady stream of employment, and a safe community.

While in the past they had used mobility in the sense of moving from community to community as a means to accomplish these goals, now they tended to view such mobility as an impediment to well being. They had experienced the hardships associated with continual movement and most expressed an unwillingness to move again.

All the women came to the community in search of a better life, although their definition of a better life varied from a higher standard of living to improved health care and a reunited family. They were aided in their move by social networks, especially family, friends, and countrymen. As they settled into the community, these networks continued to help them. Opportunities for expanding and utilizing networks differed by documentation status. Those without proper documents to live and work in the United States tended to remain isolated from the community, limiting their opportunity to expand their networks and utilize people to help them get ahead. Those with proper documentation were able to expand networks to include more formal and informal sources of help, particularly long-time residents and formal institutions like banks.

A surprising finding was how long most of the women had been in the United States and even in the new settlement community, yet how much of a newcomer status they still retained. They were not well integrated into community life and culture. The other surprise, although backed by other research (Hagan 2004), is that many of the women have been in the United States, in a new settlement community, and even in a job, for a long time and were still not getting ahead financially. One woman had worked at a processing plant for ten years and received just two 35 cent raises during that time. She was satisfied because she had job stability and her family was doing well.

Some research has concluded that immigrants from Mexico are not well assimilated because they maintain ties to sending communities through travel and communication networks (Morgan 2003). Current border conditions discourage networking via travel, yet these women are not well assimilated, as evidenced by their lack of English-speaking ability and their small

network of friends outside their families. Their isolated status may keep them from getting ahead. A study in these same communities using census data and proxies for integration found that bicultural strategies (maintain own language and learn English) yielded higher incomes (Valdivia et al., 2008). Other research points to an unwelcoming context of reception as a main reason for lack of assimilation (Portes & Rumbaut 2001). In listening to the women talk about their experiences in the greater community, the community reception has not been hostile yet their lack of assimilation is at least in part due to self perceptions which isolate them from the community. Some are fearful because of their lack of good documentation, and these remain isolated to minimize the risk that authorities will detect them. Others are isolated because they perceive that their English speaking abilities are not good. Even if they have a good command of the vocabulary, they feel that their accent sets them up for scrutiny.

This study contains important lessons for social workers. Latino immigrants may be an invisible population in a community yet have a high need for networks to help them access resources. To work with them, one must first gain their trust, as we had to do to conduct this study. One of the best ways to develop that trust is to work through an institution that already has their trust. In many communities that institution is a church or a Latino Center. Many of the settlers remain isolated from the community and its valuable networks because of self-imposed isolation related to documentation status or else because of linguistic and cultural barriers. Social workers can play a key role in helping this invisible group of settlers (who are often not really newcomers) access resources to achieve their goals. Rather than leaving a network to chance, social workers can formalize the community networking opportunities and serve the same functions as the informal networks with value added: social workers can provide information about the new settlement community and help with problems or concerns. Most use financial institutions and economizing strategies to get ahead. Social workers can be a resource to link people to financial institutions, keep them informed of those to avoid (pay-day

loan operations, for example), and also provide ideas on money saving strategies (such as using coupons when making purchases). Sometimes just offering a sympathetic ear to allow someone to voice their concerns and stress may be what is needed.

These communities are aptly named “new settlements” because Latino immigrants who are commonly associated with extreme mobility are staying in place. Even those who may not be experiencing much advancement in income are still satisfied to be united with their families in a community that offers safety and job security. As conditions at the border become more insecure, more immigrants may lose any advantages derived from mobility and opt for the alternative of staying put in these new settlement communities.

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