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Welcoming Immigrants: An Opportunity to Strengthen Rural Communities

Abstract

Rural communities matter. Almost a quarter of the Midwest's population lives in rural communities, but emerging demographic patterns, including the increase of Latinos, are changing the landscapes of rural Midwestern communities. Often, the rise in the Latino population is the deciding factor between growth or decline for a rural community. This circumstance presents a unique opportunity for Extension professionals and communities to initiate best practices around community building and welcoming of newcomers, especially immigrants. We need to harness the strength of all rural residents to create vibrant, healthy, sustainable communities that are centers of creativity and innovation.

Athena K. Ramos

Community Health
Program Manager
University of
Nebraska Medical
Center
Center for Reducing
Health Disparities
College of Public
Health
Omaha, Nebraska
aramos@unmc.edu

Background

Rural communities matter. They have served as the backdrop for much of the United States' history, and they have a strong reputation for being economic drivers and cultural icons (Curley, 2005). Rural America has abundant natural resources and a robust tradition of agricultural production. It is rich with community capitals (Flora, Flora, Fey, & Emery, 2007); however, the nature of rural communities is changing. Demographic, economic, technological, and social changes have occurred and continue to affect rural communities, presenting unique opportunities for community development initiatives. This article provides an overview of demographic trends, including increased growth of the Latino population in rural Midwestern areas; presents immigrant integration as a community development opportunity; and challenges Extension professionals to focus on welcoming immigrants and promoting a sense of community, particularly in relevant areas of the Midwest.

Demographics

Rural areas are important to the continued prosperity of the United States. In 2010, almost 60 million people lived in rural areas, representing nearly 20% of the total population of U.S. residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Emerging patterns of growth and development are occurring in rural areas. Two major trends—the in-migration of adults in their prime earning years returning to small towns and rural areas (Cantrell, 2005) and the growth of the Latino population (Saenz & Torres, 2010)—are driving these new patterns. For many communities, the increase in the Latino population is often the deciding factor between growth or decline (Johnson & Lichter, 2008). Table 1 provides an overview of demographic changes in rural, Latino, and foreign-born populations at the national and Midwest region levels.

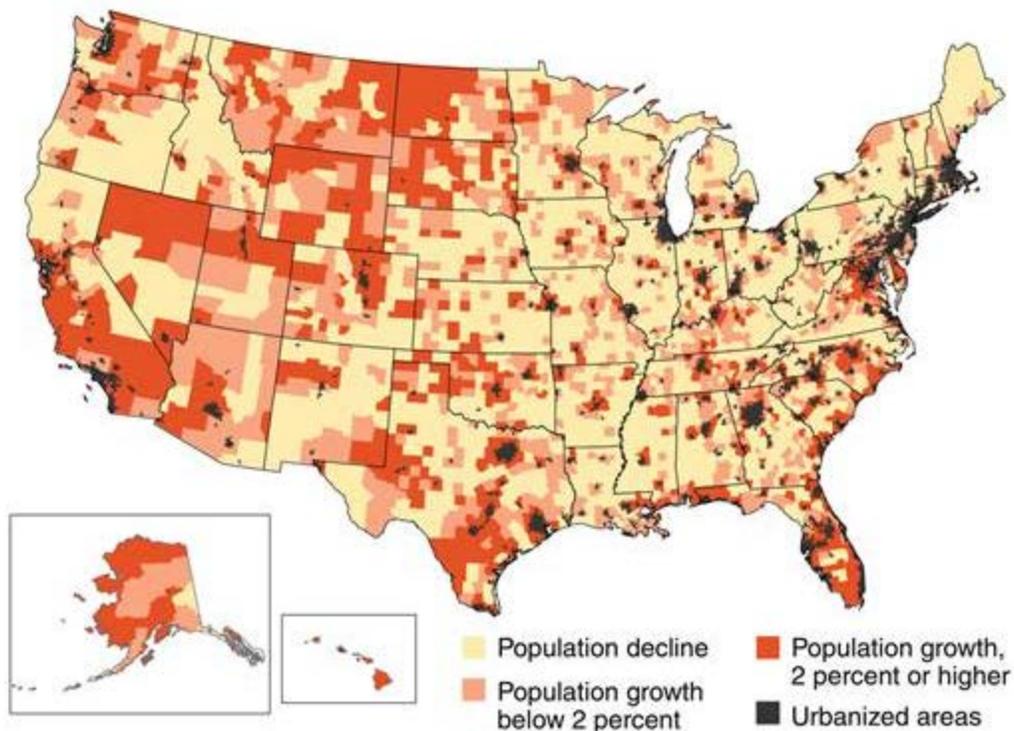
Table 1.
Rural, Latino, and Foreign-Born Populations, 1980–2010

Demographic variable	1980		1990		2000		2010
	Population	(%)	Population	(%)	Population	(%)	Population
United States							
Total	226,542,199		248,709,873		281,421,906		308,745,538
Rural	59,494,813	26.3	61,656,386	24.8	59,274,456	20.8	59,492,276
Latino	14,608,673	6.4	22,354,059	8.9	35,305,818	12.5	47,435,002
Foreign-born	14,079,906	6.2	19,767,316	7.9	31,107,889	11.1	38,517,234
Midwest region							
Total	58,865,670		59,668,632		64,392,776		66,927,001
Rural	17,345,924	29.5	16,894,436	28.3	16,887,477	26.2	16,155,355
Latino	1,276,545	2.2	1,726,509	2.9	3,124,532	4.9	4,661,678
Foreign-born	2,114,190	3.5	2,131,293	3.6	3,509,937	5.5	4,461,557
<i>Note.</i> The Midwest region includes Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. Source: U.S. Census Bureau.							

Latino and foreign-born populations have grown over time in number and proportion both nationally and regionally. Although the percentage of the population that is rural has declined at the national level, the actual number of people living in rural areas has remained relatively stable. Population

change in rural areas at subnational levels is uneven, and aggregate data do not accurately reflect the specific circumstances relative to community development at the local level. Figure 1 highlights the uneven growth in nonmetro areas.

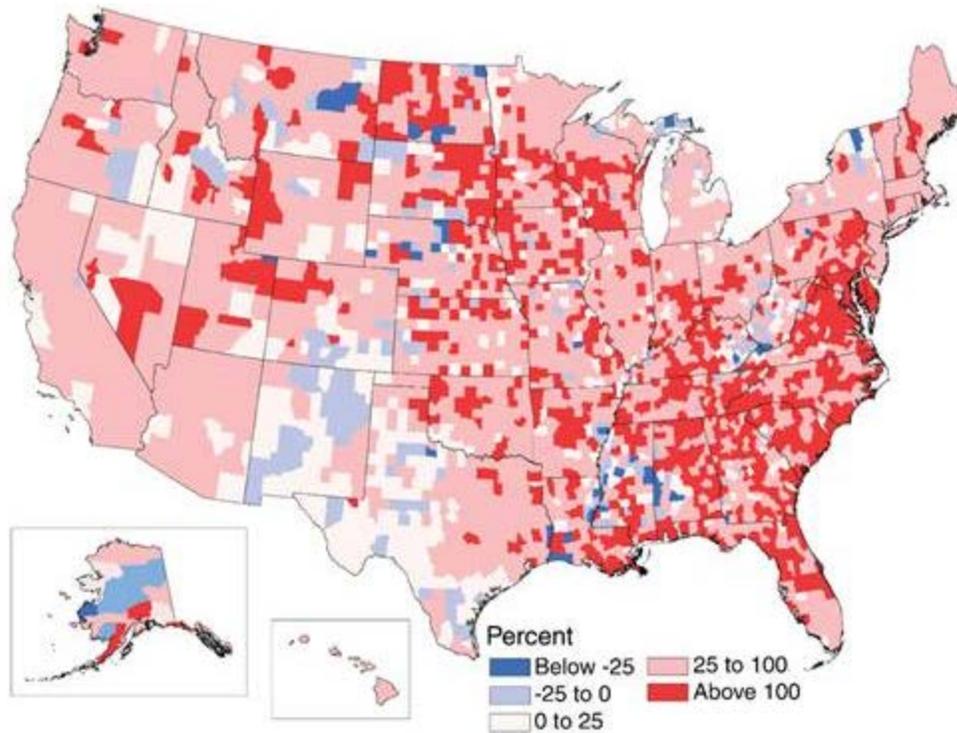
Figure 1.
Nonmetro Population Change, 2010–2013



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (2014), using data from the U.S. Census Bureau

Figure 2 highlights the uneven growth in the Latino population. Traditionally, growth in the Latino population has been realized in states such as California, Florida, New York, Texas, and Illinois, which are referred to as "traditional gateways"; however, over the last decade, growth in this population has occurred in new patterns. "New destination" states now include Nebraska, South Carolina, Alabama, Tennessee, Arkansas, South Dakota, Nevada, North Carolina, Wyoming, Idaho, and Indiana (Gresenz, Derose, Ruder, & Escarce, 2012; Terrazas, 2011). Some of the fastest growth of Latinos in nonmetro areas has taken place in the Midwest region (Saenz & Torres, 2010), and this growth is expected to continue into the foreseeable future. For example, in Nebraska, the Latino population is expected to triple by the year 2050 (Tobias, 2013), and much of this growth will be attributable not only to immigration but also to natural growth of families in rural and nonmetro areas throughout the state (Johnson & Lichter, 2008; Ramos et al., 2013; Tobias, 2013).

Figure 2.
Change in the U.S. Hispanic/Latino Population, 2000–2010



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (2014), using data from the U.S. Census Bureau

Opportunities

Latinos are transforming the social and economic fabric of many small towns and rural areas across the country, and they are the fastest growing demographic group in rural America. Rural-based industries, such as agriculture and meat processing, actively recruit immigrant and Latino workers to meet their demands for labor. Additionally, many Latinos have migrated from larger metropolitan areas in search of better paying jobs, lower cost housing, and a higher quality of life (Koball, Capps, Kandel, Henderson, & Henderson, 2008).

We have an immediate need to address how we engage with newcomers, especially immigrants, because the context of reception or welcomeness into communities can have a significant impact on whether the community and the newcomers survive or thrive (Jensen, 2006). Traditional immigrant gateways have the infrastructure in place to help immigrants acculturate, but rural areas often do not. Because of the sizes of rural communities, the impact of in-migration may be felt more strongly. Without intervention, these communities may develop "parallel" worlds whereby interaction between the established community and newcomers is limited and the immigrants' world is largely invisible to that of the greater community (Nelson & Hiemstra, 2008). Failing to integrate newcomers has both short-term and long-term consequences to the community that may include the underutilization of skills; isolation; discrimination; inefficient resource allocation; lack of sustainability, growth, and viability (Valdivia, Jeanetta, Flores, Morales, & Martinez, 2013); and negative health impacts (Viruell-Fuentes, Miranda, & Abdulrahim, 2012; Wen & Maloney, 2011). Successful incorporation and integration of immigrants into American society through the social network of local communities is imperative (Johnson, 2012).

Immigrant integration is defined as "improved economic mobility for, enhanced civic participation by, and receiving society openness to immigrants" and to occur requires "an intentional process that incorporates the needs of immigrants, their families, and their communities into policies governing our cities, regions, and states" (Pastor, Ortiz, Carter, Scoggins, & Perez, 2012). Integration creates more engaged citizens and increases social cohesion. According to the Migration Policy Institute, "Immigrants thrive best in socially and politically supportive environments that allow them to change most of their social and cultural traditions at their own pace, while learning and adapting to important community practices more quickly" (Papademetriou, 2003). To be successful, immigrant integration initiatives should incorporate the following principles (Jones-Correa, 2011; Nelson & Hiemstra, 2008; Valdivia et al., 2013):

- Encourage frequent interaction between established residents and newcomers, especially immigrants.
- Welcome and focus on assets that immigrants bring to the community.
- Reframe issues to counter misconceptions about immigrants.
- Foster a sense of belonging and a sense of community, and cultivate social capital among immigrants.
- Build partnerships across community sectors and various levels of government.

A new scorecard system for immigrant integration has been developed and tested in rural California by researchers at the University of Southern California. They developed a variety of indicators to represent aspects of immigrant integration, including economic mobility, civic engagement, and warmth of welcome from receiving communities (Pastor et al., 2012). Here is an example of where Extension fits into the picture. Extension professionals are uniquely positioned to assist communities in accessing and using tools such as this scorecard to plan comprehensive efforts focused on integration of newcomers, especially immigrants. This type of community self-evaluation may represent an opportunity to assess Midwestern communities on these indicators and provide communities with feedback so that they can initiate, enhance, or improve their integration efforts.

Communities can be transformed through strategic community-building efforts. Strategies that are based on recognition that complex issues require cooperative efforts and that involve building a common sense of mission, cultivating social capital, and furthering a sense of community, civic participation, and collective efficacy are needed (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Ricketts & Place, 2009; Saegert, 2004). Extension professionals are trusted resources who have the technical capacity to foster these types of community-building strategies through participatory methodologies that model inclusiveness and foster a sense of belonging among all rural residents. As a first step, Extension professionals can empower residents to dialogue and collaboratively define a community vision and a plan for future community development (Lachapelle, Austin, & Clark, 2010; Raison & Gordon, 2012; Valdivia et al., 2013) by evaluating community capitals—especially human, social, cultural, and political capitals (Flora et al., 2007).

Conclusion

Changing demographic trends represent a significant opportunity to promote community building and inclusivity in rural America and specifically in the Midwest. I believe that immigrants and all people bring inherent strengths to a community. Allowing myths, fears, and xenophobia to fester in communities is not productive. Understanding how to harness the power and passion within rural communities may be challenging, but positive change is possible through targeted investment of time and energy by communities themselves and community development professionals, such as Extension personnel.

We know that local populations must participate in defining a community's development agenda and that they are an essential part of any sustainable community development initiative (Asset-Based Community Development Institute, 2009; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Engaging newcomers in the community development process is important to setting an agenda that will work for all residents. Rural communities can start with simple but important conversations about the vision for a community's future and how to leverage local assets, including human, social, cultural, and political capital, to attain that vision (Lachapelle et al., 2010).

Extension professionals are agents of community development, and immigrant integration is a useful strategy that can strengthen a community's viability and vitality. There is promise in working collaboratively with rural communities to welcome and embrace newcomers and build a sense of community that fosters creativity, innovation, and success for all. The community is only as strong as its members; therefore, it is in everyone's best interest to levy the collective strength of all of the community's residents. I challenge Extension professionals to begin discussions now with the communities they serve around issues of inclusivity, welcomeness, and integration so that all rural residents have an opportunity to thrive.

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